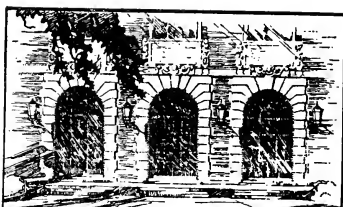


A MERE CYPHER

MARY A. DICKENS



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A Novel

BY
MARY ANGELA DICKENS

AUTHOR OF "CROSS CURRENTS."

"Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sound
Reverbs no hollowness."

IN THREE VOLUMES

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A MERE CYPHER

CHAPTER I.

FROM a street of houses the uniform white paint of which has taken on varying shades of grime, from white paving-stones and a narrow road, it is not possible, granted any quantity of sunshine, to produce colour; but it is possible to produce glare. In an atmosphere so laden with smoke and dust that even the sky looks pale and dirty it is not possible to produce exhilaration; but it is possible to produce almost unlimited oppression. Foiled on the one side the full power of the sun may be concentrated on the other, and nature's great magician become a tyrant.

In a small crescent in Bloomsbury cause and effect of this description were equally rife one August morning, five years after the spring which Norman Strange had spent at Thornsdyke. It was not yet ten o'clock, but the sun had been beating pitilessly down for the last five hours ; and there was something cruel and relentless in the steady brilliance with which it scorched the ugly houses and the dusty road, making the ugliness uglier and the dust more all-pervading, until it seemed that no November fog or February downpour could be so unendurably dreary as that glaring summer sunshine.

The houses were not provided with sun-blinds ; in most of them the choice lay between the semi-darkness and total airlessness of tightly-closed venetian blinds, and the full glare of the sun. In the first-floor

room of one of those in which the former alternative had been chosen, somewhat late for the meal though it was, Mrs. Custance and her husband were at breakfast. It was a small, furnished house, and the room was the description of dining-room inevitable under the circumstances, rather shabby, rather dingy, essentially wanting in any sort of charm. One of the closely-drawn venetian blinds wanted mending, there was a great gap between two of the laths, and the ray of hot, vivid sunshine which came through and fell across the room in a great glaring bar, bringing with it a suggestion of what lay outside that seemed to add to the oppression of the atmosphere within, seemed to touch nothing in which it did not bring into strong relief the ugliness and dreariness which the surrounding dimness hardly seemed to soften. It would have

been difficult to say exactly what was wrong. The room was scrupulously clean and neat; the ugly sideboard was in no need of polish; dust, except in that relentless ray of light, was nowhere to be seen; nor was there any painfully apparent air of poverty; but there was a curiously forlorn and unhomelike appearance which was not merely the ordinary characteristic of the furnished house, but which suggested a total want of hope or interest in the care bestowed upon it.

Silence had been quite unbroken since breakfast began. Once Dr. Custance had looked up from his plate as though to make a remark, and the nervous start with which his wife received the movement was a proof that such an occurrence was an exception. Something in the paper propped before him, however, had apparently caught his eye at the moment; he had not spoken, and after

a moment or two of nervous attention, she had relapsed into the attitude in which she had sat since finishing her own breakfast some minutes earlier, her hands loosely clasped in her lap, her head a little drooping; an attitude expressive of nothing but a patient sense of oppression which might have been either physical or mental.

Five years had gone by since Norman Strange had said good-bye to Mrs. Custance in the dining-room at the White House; five more uneventful years in her uneventful life. Dr. Custance had given up his practice at Thornsdyke shortly after Norman's departure, and they had lived for some time in a fashionable seaside town, whence they had moved, first into the country again, and then to London. Nothing more stirring than these removals had occurred, and Mrs. Custance had accepted these in a manner to deprive

them of any exciting or striking characteristics which they might have possessed. "Mrs. Custance was so indifferent," was the opinion that was gaining ground in Thornsdyke when she left it. This being the case, time had naturally changed her very little. Five years before, at six-and-twenty, she had looked like a woman of six-and-thirty; now at one-and-thirty she looked little older. Change, striking change of any kind, was rather inconceivable in connection with that little, worn, faded personality. Change involves the presence of force of some kind, even if the change consists simply in the withdrawal of that force; and she apparently had so little. And yet if there had been any one at once sympathetic and keen-sighted to compare the Mrs. Custance of Thornsdyke with the Mrs. Custance who sat opposite her husband

at the breakfast-table on this August morning, it would have been obvious that she was altered, though the alteration consisted solely in an accentuation of characteristics that had been hers before. The dull blue eyes were duller than they had been, and there was a patient weariness in their apathetic glance ; a weariness which had changed, as she lifted them to her husband, to a nervousness so painful and excessive that it was almost fear. There were lines about the mouth which had not been there five years ago, and which told of hopeless, unresenting depression. Such expression as her face had once possessed seemed to have subdued itself into something that had not the power of endurance, nor the dignity of resignation, nor the pathos of suffering, but which faintly and strangely enough suggested all the three ; numbed, and impotent to struggle into active life. Her

figure looked a little thinner and more awkward than it had been, and her face also was, perhaps, a trifle thinner and more colourless for the passing of those five uneventful years.

“I thought I told you yesterday to mend that blind.”

The ray of sunlight on its way through the room was falling now exactly across Dr. Custance's newspaper, and its dazzling presence caused him to shift his position as he addressed himself to his wife without looking up at her. She looked up, however, at the first sound of the cold, hard voice in which he spoke; the loose clasp of her thin hands became a nervous grip, and her voice, as she answered, was hurried and faltering. It had evidently been no part of the work of the past five years to lessen her timidity with her husband.

“I—I forgot; I am very sorry!” was all she said.

“I’m glad of that, at any rate!” The words themselves were simple enough, but the tone in which they were spoken, dry and sarcastic, made them cut like a knife, and the blue eyes which watched him so anxiously dilated a little. Their owner made no attempt to defend herself, however, and Dr. Custance, who had turned his head towards her as he finished speaking, looked at her for a moment and then went on, speaking slowly and deliberately in the same tone: “I don’t know, Leila, of course, whether you are pleased to consider yourself either amusing or ornamental—possibly you find yourself both. I merely wish to mention that I make no demands on you in those lines, and that the only expectation I have is some slight attention to trifling domestic details.”

He paused, tacitly inviting a response, and her lips moved, but no words were audible.

“What did you say, Leila?”

It was some time now since Dr. Custance had discovered a means by which practically unlimited distress might be inflicted on his wife with no trouble and a considerable amount of contemptuous amusement to himself, and he used his weapon with lazy satisfaction. Having indulged his temper as far as he ever took the trouble to indulge it, he had only to insist on audible answers when nervousness had rendered speech almost impossible to her.

Five years had not improved Dr. Custance. They had been five years of such lazy self-indulgence as his circumstances allowed; five years of which the only effort had been the effort to obtain

money without giving money's equivalent—labour; five years during which he had used the large share of brains with which nature had endowed him only in shirking work wherever it was possible, and in scamping it where it was not. The result was visible in his face as he sat now looking at his wife. It had grown coarser and harder; the eyes were more indolent than ever, but there was a look in them that suggested a capacity for unscrupulous calculation; and the half-smile that curled his lips as he met the bewildered blue eyes was a cruel one. His lips were parted to repeat his question when his attention was diverted by the opening of the door and the entrance of the servant.

“If you please, sir,” she said, “the Reverend Chisholm would like to speak to you.”

“Chisholm!” exclaimed Dr. Custance. “Confound the fellow! What can he want at this time in the morning?” Then he rose from his chair with a movement of indolent annoyance, and as he did so the strained expression of distress which had faintly shadowed itself forth on Mrs. Custance’s face gradually subsided, as though with the sense that her bad moment was passed for the time being. A certain anxious, mute observance of her husband remained, however; it was apparently habitual to her in his presence.

There was a moment’s pause, and then Dr. Custance turned to the servant—a fresh-looking country girl.

“Have you shown him into the drawing-room?” he said. “And how long is it, Susan, since I told you to say Mr. Chisholm?”

“I beg your pardon, sir, I’m sure,” was the answer. “No, sir, I was turning out the drawing-room, and the Reverend—leastways, Mr. Chisholm, he’s in the hall, sir.”

“You must show him in here then, I suppose,” returned Dr. Custance, with a glance at the breakfast-table, and a muttered reiteration of, “Confound the fellow!” as the girl withdrew. His wife had risen and was standing hesitating by the table, and Dr. Custance had only time to say to her quickly, and in a tone which made the words an order, “You needn’t go, Leila!” before the “Reverend Chisholm” appeared in person.

He was a very young man, short and rather round. He had a round, innocent face in which the features made no particular effort to assert themselves; eyes of which neither the colour nor the size was calculated to

impress, though they were honest and simple ; and sandy hair. What his personality might have been under other circumstances it was not possible to say, for any individuality that he might have possessed was completely swamped by the strong professional aroma which was his most striking characteristic. He had evidently very recently become a pillar of the Church ; his youth, the ultra-correctness of his dress—that of the orthodox High Churchman—testified to this fact, and his bearing and expression testified to his constant sense of the dignities and responsibilities of his new position. And the pallor of the chubby, boyish face that should naturally have been rather rosy than otherwise, and a tired, fagged appearance about the greenish eyes, testified further to the fact that those responsibilities were no mere name to him, that his embryo priestliness

consisted not merely in being, but that a very considerable amount of earnest doing accompanied it.

He came quickly into the room and advanced to Mrs. Custance with a mixture of priestly confidence and individual embarrassment that mingled somewhat oddly, and he shook the hand she held out to him almost as nervously as it was offered.

“I’m afraid I’m disturbing you, Mrs. Custance!” he said, and the diffident deference in his tone and manner was by no means affected by the ill-assured uncertainty of the woman to whom he spoke. Ladies had been something of an alarm to Aubrey Chisholm throughout the innocent schoolboy life that had lasted to all intents and purposes up to his ordination, and he had had as yet little professional intercourse with them. He was quite unconscious of any difference

between Mrs. Custance and the most self-possessed woman of his acquaintance, except inasmuch as additional respect was due to the former in his eyes, owing to the fact that she "worked in the parish"; the parish in question being that particular cure of souls which was his centre of the universe. Mrs. Custance, however, was so little accustomed to respect that her nervousness was only increased by it, and they embarrassed one another mutually.

"Not at all," she murmured, now. "How do you do?" And Mr. Chisholm turned to shake hands with her husband.

"I'm rather early," he said apologetically, speaking in the natural, straightforward way which was evidently habitual to him when he was not embarrassed. A gentleman's instinct kept his eyes meanwhile from the late breakfast-table which his youthful asceticism was

loudly condemning. "It's a busy day with us, and I was anxious to see you before I began my visiting."

"Don't apologise," returned Dr. Custance languidly, but by no means uncourteously. "I am quite at your service. Won't you sit down?"

"I have come about the trust lands, as no doubt you take for granted," answered the young man with a faint smile, sitting down as he spoke on the nearest chair, apparently hardly conscious of his movement in his absorption in his subject. "I want to have another talk with you about their possibilities." He glanced at Mrs. Custance as he finished, as though he would have preferred the freedom of her absence for the talk in question; but she had seated herself on a chair by the window, and even if she had seen and understood the glance the

thought of defying her husband's wish would never have occurred to her.

"Their impossibilities, Mr. Chisholm, I'm afraid you mean," answered Dr. Custance pleasantly and imperturbably.

"That's just the point," returned the young man, speaking with a plodding eagerness that belonged to his honest face. "If I could only get you to see that I do not contemplate the impossible, it would be half the battle."

He paused, and then, Dr. Custance responding by a smile and a shake of the head, he began again, his manner quickened into the ardour of one whose interest in an always favourite topic has quite recently received a stimulus.

"Now, just let me put the case to you again as I see it," he said. "The land when the trust was originally willed was

worth several hundred pounds a year. A succession of bad tenants and careless stewardship have reduced it until it brings in at this moment not more than a third of the original sum, and the trust is practically a dead letter."

"That is unfortunately the case," corroborated Dr. Custance parenthetically.

"But there is the land still!" was the eager response. "Its resources are as great now as they were a hundred years ago. As great, do I say, Dr. Custance? They are considerably greater. The modern improvements in the science of farming and drainage open out numberless possibilities of improvement. They have only to be applied and the mistakes and carelessness of the last thirty years would be neutralised in three, and the people who are so sadly in need of assistance would have that which is theirs by right."

There was a ring of very real earnestness in the last words, in spite of the strong access of priestliness that had suppressed the youthful, practical, persevering argumentativeness of the earlier part of his speech.

Dr. Custance smiled again and passed the last words over. He was leaning lazily back in his chair surveying the unconscious awkwardness of his visitor's attitude with indolent, inscrutable eyes.

"As you say," he observed placidly, "these methods have only to be applied. Unfortunately the said application constitutes the impossibility I spoke of."

"That is exactly what brings me here this morning," returned the young man, promptly returning to his business-like tone with an obvious effort, and evidently flattering himself that he was speaking with the greatest perspicuity. "The first outlay has

hitherto been—I won't say the impossibility—but the obstacle, and now I think the way through it has shown itself."

"Indeed!"

"I have heard of a man—or rather, I should say, that my sister has heard of a man—who could, we believe, be induced to advance the necessary capital."

As Aubrey Chisholm made his statement in a tone which was perhaps not so free from elation and importance as he hoped, Dr. Custance darted one keen, quick look at him. Then he settled himself rather more comfortably in his chair, meditated the young man's statement apparently for a moment, and finally said, fixing his indolent eyes full on the simple, boyish face :

"Miss Chisholm thinks he might be induced to advance the necessary capital! Has she, or have you, may I ask, Mr.

Chisholm, considered the detail of security? Possibly you have arranged that with Mr. Essendine."

"My uncle will do nothing, as you know, Dr. Custance," said the young man, "but my sister and I have considered the question and we think that the land itself—or that Mr. Rowe, the gentleman I speak of, who is deeply interested in the condition of the poor, might possibly consent to waive the question." He spoke stoutly and rather stiffly, holding loyally by his introduction of his sister's name into the argument, but evidently a little shaken and disturbed by Dr. Custance's politely belittling reception of his words. "When you come to consider the whole case," he broke out suddenly, "when you look at all that is involved——"

But Dr. Custance interrupted him, politely but with an expression that seemed

to imply that he had no intention of being bored to that extent, and that he was saving himself by the handiest means available.

“Quite so! Quite so!” he said gravely and quickly. “Well, Mr. Chisholm, if you and Miss Chisholm have paved the way, as I imagine you have, on the philanthropic lines, perhaps the next step will be for me to approach this Mr. Rowe from the business point of view. Where is he to be found?”

Aubrey Chisholm appeared to feel that the matter was thus cursorily disposed of. He had come to Dr. Custance that morning for the express purpose of inducing him to put himself into communication with the said Mr. Rowe, but he apparently experienced none of the elation incidental to the attainment of an end as Dr. Custance gravely took down the address dictated to him. On the contrary he looked as though the colour had

in some mysterious way departed from his scheme, whatever that scheme might be. He hesitated a moment as though he were trying, and trying in vain, to think of something more to say, and then he rose, saying :

“I needn’t detain you any longer then, thanks, Dr. Custance. I must be getting back. You will let me know the result.”

He took his leave of Mrs. Custance in a saddened, almost depressed manner, and went away, accompanied to the door by Dr. Custance, with the indolent cordiality which he had exhibited throughout the interview.

CHAPTER II.

THAT manner of Dr. Custance's was very far from expressive of his real feeling towards Aubrey Chisholm, and was dictated solely by policy. Dr. Custance had come to London six months before on speculation merely. He had grown tired of country practices, and it had occurred to him that London was, after all, the obvious place in which to "pick up" something that should be a sinecure as far as work went. In the very first week of his arrival he had chanced to stumble across a City magnate whose acquaintance he had made some years earlier ; a pompous, stupid, and very rich old man, who had quarrelled

with his doctor at the sea-side place at which he was staying, and had called in Dr. Custance out of pure and simple spite. In conversation with this Mr. Essendine Dr. Custance had cleverly, and apparently quite incidentally, alluded to his present unoccupied position, and the chance cast had been successful beyond his hopes; it resulted in an offer made him by Mr. Essendine with much pomp and patronage, of a post which was exactly what he wanted, inasmuch as it entailed a yearly income and nothing to do for it.

It was an anomalous post, and it had originated as many anomalies do in a course of neglect and wrong. An ancestor of the Essendine family, some hundred years before—a rich old man of an eccentric and disagreeable temperament—had begun the course by quarrelling with his family, and dying, had

left his large property in a variety of curious trusts, apparently arranged with a view less to the benefit of mankind than to the annoyance of his relatives. Among these trusts was one which, at that stage of cosmopolitan developement obtaining at the time, had seemed more eccentric than all the rest. At a date when the colonies were comparatively young, and emigrant and exile were synonymous terms, a clause in old Ralph Essendine's will devoted the yearly income of a certain piece of land in the Midlands to the furtherance of emigration from a certain specified parish in London; "the testator believing," so ran the crabbed and very unpatriotic will, "that it is impossible for a man to be worse off in a wilderness than he must be in England, and that separation from his family would, in most cases, be an inestimable boon to him." That the money

thus willed might never be diverted from the purpose thus charitably indicated, it was further provided by the will that the trust should never be amalgamated with any other charitable society, but should be administered by salaried officers of its own, to be appointed by the trustees, and paid out of the income derived from the land. And it was further provided that the parish indicated by the will, and no other, should benefit.

Like attracts like, and it was not strange that a trust so willed, originating, as it were, in spite and rancour, should from the first have been administered in no spirit of justice or honesty, and that little good to any one should have resulted from it. The funds were misappropriated, the land neglected, and a hundred years from old Ralph Essendine's death found the trust existing in name only, with only one trustee, the present Ralph

Essendine, and only sufficient income to pay the one officer necessary under the terms of the will.

It was to this nominal secretaryship, treasurership, or managership, whichever it might most fitly be called since nothing was either managed or treasured, and where no correspondence was carried on, that Dr. Custance had been appointed by the sole trustee.

Aubrey Chisholm was the present Ralph Essendine's nephew, and it was simply because he was his patron's near relation that the young man never received from Dr. Custance anything approaching discourtesy. For Aubrey Chisholm was the one shadow upon Dr. Custance's satisfaction with his present lot. He and his sister were the only children of a sister of Mr. Essendine's; she had married a young soldier, a descen-

dant of a long line of soldiers, a scholar and a gentleman. She and her husband had both died before the little girl was two years old, leaving their children, each with a little money, to the care of their mother's sister, who was rich and childless. The boy had early developed an instinct for practical religion which had made the church his natural destination, and on his ordination, fate—a very perverse and irritating fate it seemed to Dr. Custance—had settled him in the very parish to which his great-great-grandfather had made his remarkable bequest for the salvation of man from his relations, a parish in the south of London. At that time the young man had never heard of the Essendine trust, and when a chance discovery made by his sister in some old family papers opened out the track, and the state of things became clear, his excitement

—the excitement of brother and sister alike
—was considerable.

Time, which had stood still with the Essendine trust, had stood still with nothing else. The parish which a century before had been poor certainly, but not very poor, was now one of those terrible problems to be found in every great city; hopelessly poverty-stricken, miserably degraded, and overcrowded to a degree inconceivable by those who do not know. The boon so cynically provided a hundred years before had changed its aspect in the interval, and was capable now of a reading that made it a boon indeed; emigration with all its possibilities had become a fact such as old Ralph Essendine had never dreamed of. To Aubrey Chisholm, looking at the terrible compression, the stifling contact with which he was brought daily face to face, the thought of an

annual income, even a small annual income, to be devoted to the transport of a few of those miserable human beings to homes where they should have space and hope was the thought of an inestimable blessing. Aubrey was neither quick nor easily worked up, but stimulated by the enthusiasm of his sister he set to work to secure that blessing for his people ; to revive the dead letter of the past and make it a living reality of the present.

It needed all his sister's ardour and his own sense of duty to bring him up to his first step, which was obviously a call on the sole trustee of the fund. Interviews with his uncle had been eminently unpleasant to him all his life. And here at the very outset he met with a heavy rebuff. Family rancour is a curious thing, and never more curious than in its hereditary aspect. The Ralph

Essendine of eighteen hundred and eighty hated the Ralph Essendine of seventeen hundred and eighty as his grandfather had done before him, and he would do nothing whatever towards the revival of the trust left by him. He was aware that the income of the trust was swallowed by the salary of its official ; he was grimly satisfied with the fact as pointing the futility of his ancestor's arrangements. Beyond this he neither knew nor cared anything about the business, and he left his nephew no doubt whatever as to his sentiments on the subject.

Aubrey Chisholm himself might have accepted the obstacles thus raised between him and his hopes as at any rate indefinitely postponing the realisation of the latter ; but his sister was not easily discouraged. At her instigation and with her help her brother went into all the details of the trust, investi-

gated the property, and interviewed Dr. Custance. The property consisted of a considerable acreage of farm land; a series of bad tenants had reduced it to the lowest stage of exhaustion, and much of it was also practically undrained. Its present tenant held it at a merely nominal rent, and was too poor a man to improve it in any way. All sorts of schemes by which its value might be increased were concocted by the brother and sister, some of them somewhat youthful, but none wholly impracticable, and were unfolded by Aubrey to Dr. Custance, one after the other, with the same hopeful patience and perseverance.

But Dr. Custance had no intention of lending himself to any plan that involved work for himself in the present or in the future. He was lazily content with his small income, and he meant to retain it on

the present terms, and with this end in view he quietly extinguished any and every scheme which was likely to lead to important developements. The chief and most potent extinguisher employed by him, was a simple representation of the lack of capital. He altogether negatived any proposal for borrowing it, and uncountenanced either by him or by Mr. Essendine, any effort in this direction on the part of Aubrey Chisholm was of course impossible. And on the financial question Dr. Custance was in the habit of assuming a pleasant superiority as of a practical man of the world, before which the young man's theories, however carefully worked out, however sound they had seemed before they were propounded to Dr. Custance, suddenly seemed to lose all backbone for him.

It was the jubilant conviction of both brother and sister that the capital difficulty

was practically solved, that had brought Aubrey Chisholm to the house in Bloomsbury so early on that August morning. It was some time now since their last attempt had failed, and their present move had been carefully and patiently planned. The Mr. Rowe of whom Aubrey had spoken, was a rich merchant of philanthropic tendencies; he had listened with much apparent interest to the statements made by Aubrey, and with even more obvious interest to the statements made by Aubrey's sister, and he was regarded by both as the long looked-for lever. The doubt and depression in which Aubrey brought the interview to a close, were the result of that manner which Dr. Custance had found extremely useful on several somewhat similar occasions in the course of their intercourse.

Dr. Custance shut the street door after his visitor with a lazy smile and as lazy an

ejaculation. "Young idiot!" he said to himself, and then he strolled back to the dining-room where his wife was standing, having evidently risen to ring the bell.

"I'm going out," he said, "I shan't be in until the evening. You needn't sit up."

It was his custom to spend a great many of the long summer days watching a cricket-match, after which he would dine at his club in the evening; and he turned on his heel and left the room again without waiting for an answer.

His words brought the faintest possible expression of relief to his wife's face, and it deepened—or perhaps it would be truer to say that the anxiety which had been her dominant expression faded, and left her face quite passive—when, a few minutes after, she heard the street door shut behind him. Mrs. Custance had no friends in London.

During the day before her, if it was to be spent as many of its predecessors had been spent, she would probably exchange words with no one but her servant. But as she sat down for the morning in the hot, dreary room, she showed no sign of anything but passive acceptance of her lot. She was at work upon an apparently interminable seam in a garment which looked like charity work; Aubrey Chisholm or his rector could have told its destination; and as she sat with her eyes bent upon it, her fingers moving mechanically, it would have been impossible to obtain from her face any clue whatever to her thoughts, or indeed to have concluded with any certainty that she thought at all. She must have been thinking, however; her mind was certainly not with the present; for a sudden ring at the bell made her start violently. The ring was followed by a

momentary colloquy at the door to which she paid no attention, and then the street door was shut again, the dining-room door opened, and the servant appeared with a letter.

"A letter for you, ma'am," she announced, in a tone of friendly interest. Susan was of opinion that her mistress's life was "horrid dull," and a letter for Mrs. Custance was a rarity. "It come by hand, mum, and the gentleman wouldn't wait."

She handed the letter to her mistress as she spoke, and as Mrs. Custance's eyes fell upon it a sudden, curious kind of spasm passed in a flash across the passive face.

"A gentleman?" she said, and her voice, the subdued voice of the habitually silent, caught a little as she spoke. "What kind of gentleman, Susan?"

"A stout, red-faced gentleman, with brass buttons on his coat, ma'am," was the prompt

reply. And then as her mistress neither looked up nor spoke again, Susan reluctantly withdrew.

Mrs. Custance did not seem to hear her go. She was sitting motionless, the letter in her hand, her eyes fixed upon it. Her face was a little pale and tremulous as though that strange spasm had shaken her. There was no definite expression, no consciousness of any kind about it ; only the age had gradually left it, and it was almost like the face of a child. She sat quite still until the large tears slowly gathered in the blue eyes and rolled down her cheeks. Then she moved, put up her hand mechanically and involuntarily to brush them away, and opened the letter.

“MY DEAR MRS. CUSTANCE,” it ran,

“I am in England again at last, and I am delighted to find you within reach.

May I take a great liberty and invite myself to dinner with you and Custance next Friday week ? It is an age since we have met, and I am afraid I've been a bad correspondent lately.

“ Yours very truly,

“ NORMAN STRANGE.”

Mrs. Custance read it through once ; lifted her eyes, which were quite dazed-looking, and gazed for a moment straight before her. Then she re-read it, folded it mechanically, and put it back into its envelope.

“ It is five years ! ” she said, evidently without consciousness that she spoke aloud.

“ It is five years.”

CHAPTER III.

“AND what are you going to do now, old boy?”

The question was asked in a tone of lazy interest, by a man who was leaning comfortably back in a comfortable chair with a cigarette in his hand. He was a man who might have been any age between thirty and forty, with well-cut features and a rather languid and imperturbable expression; there was something about that expression, about his pose, and about the matter-of-course perfection of his dress—correct and up to date, even to the dainty buttonhole he wore—that would have made it impossible to imagine

him a worker of any kind, and stamped him as the best type of the well-bred man about town.

The question was addressed to Norman Strange, who knocked the ash from his cigarette with a characteristically impulsive movement as he answered with a laugh :

“Oh, my plans have settled themselves definitely at last, Mansfield.”

The two men were alone together in the sitting-room of a set of bachelor's chambers in the neighbourhood of Hyde Park — Norman's rooms. It was a small room, rather erratic as to its furniture, every piece of which, however, was good of its kind, and mainly conspicuous for a certain simplicity and absence of that over-ornamentation to which the bachelor who takes any interest at all in his rooms is somewhat addicted. There was a large and

well-filled bookcase, and there was a rather nondescript and curious collection of good engravings and small pictures on the walls ; and there was also, in one corner, a collection of guns and fishing-rods and sporting tackle of all sorts, a selection from which lay on the table by the two men, having been recently inspected. Ten days had passed since Mrs. Custance had received Norman Strange's letter, but the hot weather still continued. It had been an even unusually hot day, but it was now five o'clock in the afternoon, and Norman's room, carefully shaded during the heat by sun-blinds artfully constructed to keep out the sun and let in the air, was delightfully cool and comfortable. The window was, of course, wide open, and the two men were sitting near it ; his guest with his back to it, Norman himself facing it, the alert vigour of his pose, his arms resting on the

back rail of the chair across which he was sitting, thrown into striking relief by the nonchalance of the other man.

There was an instant's pause after his last words, and then as his friend made an interrogative movement, Norman continued :

"I am going to try for Parliament as a beginning," and there was a purposeful, energetic, self-confident ring in his voice that seemed the natural outcome of his face and figure.

Norman Strange had altered considerably in the five years that had passed since he left Thornsdyke ; altered with the natural developement of a man from youth to manhood when he has spent his time well, working hard and steadily and on the right lines. His face was still thin—it was very brown now as though from exposure, and the colour was becoming,

as it usually is to a man — but there was no longer anything immature about it; it had grown firm and manly. The features were more refined than they had been; the mouth at once stronger and more sensitive. His present manhood, in short, seemed to show how boyish he had been before. But in the whole personality of the man of to-day—links confusing past and present until either difference or similarity seemed unreal—the leading characteristics of the youth of old made themselves apparent, unchanged, only developed by time. The attitude in which he sat now facing his friend was the attitude of the restless, spirited Norman of long ago, though the shoulders were broader and the whole frame firmer. The gesture with which he flicked away the ash of his cigar as he talked carried in it the old impetuous ardour.

The deeper ring in his voice had not suppressed its capacity for ready fire and enthusiasm; the increase of power in his face had not overlaid its truth and honesty. His next words to his friend seemed to show that the boy and the man were at one, not only on the surface; that work and life had failed to overlay, though they might have deepened and matured, the ideals and quixotisms of his early youth; that his boyish tendency to set the world to rights had only adapted itself. Indeed as he spoke, and kindled as he spoke, it became apparent that there was something about him still, for all his maturity, something that would probably remain with him as long as he lived, which is called, for want of a better word, "youthfulness," because the hope, the self-confidence, and enthusiasm which it involves so seldom last when physical youth is past.

“There’s a heap of work to be done in the House, Mansfield,” he said, “by a man who has no need to think of his own interests.” It was difficult, as he spoke, to imagine any circumstances in which Norman Strange’s own interests would not be fairly certain to go to the wall in the ardour of work. “I don’t mean political work, you know, but social. I’ve been looking about a good bit in America, you know, and now I’ve come back I want to work out a thing or two.”

He paused again, and the other man expressed his polite contempt for work in the abstract by a languid uplifting of his eyebrows. He smiled, however, and composed himself to listen further easily enough, as he murmured deprecatingly :

“What a painfully industrious fellow you are, Strange.”

He had only known Norman for the last two years, but to his acquaintances of to-day the latter's schemes and aspirations, more practical but no less impulsive than in his earlier years, were as essentially part and parcel of the man they liked as they had once been to his college friends.

There were very few of the men who called Norman Strange friend to-day, even among those who had come back to him out of that early life from which he had cut himself off during the months that preceded his departure to Thornsdyke, to whom the story of that black gap in his life was anything but a hazy and unreal remembrance. Many of those whose acquaintance he had made during the past five years had never heard the story, and those who had heard it never realised it in connection with the man they knew as pleasant, self-respecting, successful,

and immaculately sober. If he had found temptations in his way on rejoining the world he had resisted them, one and all, manfully. He had failed in the Warrens' smoking-room at Sletton. If he had had time to drink the whisky he had then accepted the battle might possibly have begun afresh and the result must have been doubtful. He had been saved from the consequences of his rashness, however, and the shock of realising what he had done—realising it without the sense of degradation which might so easily have accompanied that realisation—had done much for him. He had come face to face with the precipice beneath him without the shattering horror of a fall, and he had learnt his lesson. He was the stronger and firmer on the right path for that one false step, and it had had no successor.

On returning to London from Thornsdyke Norman had settled himself in quiet rooms and had applied himself vigorously to work. He had gone back to his legal studies, little as he liked them, on the principle of taking up his life where he had thrown it away, and living down the past ; and he had worked at them steadily and resolutely. He had compensated the nature in him which found nothing congenial in the law by a variety of nondescript employments ; studying all manner of subjects, useful and useless, and writing a good deal for various magazines. For some time he received no encouragement whatever from his uncle, who was indeed considerably annoyed at what he believed to be merely a lucid interval, involving a repetition of the disgrace of the past ; and when the lucid interval had lasted for two years, and he brought himself to extend it

recognition, there was no cordiality in his acknowledgement of his nephew, and Norman felt bitterly that his uncle was perhaps the only man he knew who neither forgot nor forgave. He received from him little or no help in his profession; the relations between them, in spite of all the nephew's efforts, remained cold and distant; and when his uncle died about a year later all Norman's sorrow lay in his remorse and self-reproach for the disappointment he had been and in no sense whatever for personal loss.

By that time Norman was in practice as a barrister; that is to say he had been called to the bar, but if his living had depended on his practice he would have found it hard to exist. Legal roads to fortune, like most others, lie uphill at the outset, even for those who find their vocation in the study of the law, and this Norman did not do. He was

a very clever young man, but he was a very bad barrister ; and he was naturally too impetuous, too headlong, his sympathies and antipathies were alike too hot and too easily kindled to allow of his ever making a good one. He worked very hard against the grain for another year after his uncle's death, declining to know where or why he was beaten, and then, before his energies were at all worn, or his hopefulness abated, there came to him an unexpected stroke of good fortune. His aunts, the two old ladies in Westmoreland, whom he had hardly known, died within a week of one another and left him, to his inexpressible astonishment, fifty thousand pounds.

The legacy revolutionised at once all his plans for the future. He had worked away at the legal life he hated because such work seemed to him to be the only means avail-

able to him by which a comparatively poor young man could win a front place in the battle of life; a battle which for Norman involved innumerable interests other than his own. But to the man of capital innumerable courses were open, and Norman's head straightway became a confused whirl of schemes, all more or less generous, quixotic, and practical. The news had come to him just before the long vacation ; he had been a little overworked, though the briefs that had fallen to his lot during the term were easily counted, and the first conclusion at which he arrived was that he would take six months' holiday abroad and see the world.

The six months had lengthened themselves to nearly twelve ; he had visited India, Australia, and America, and had considered the problem of his future under every conceivable variety of circumstance. And now

he was at home again with all his plans arranged, prepared to begin the work he had laid out for himself; a Parliamentary career—as he had told the friend whose question as to the future had followed on a long talk about his travels—and labour on various lines for social good.

He had a good deal to say on the subject in response to the other man's tacit invitation to confidence, and he said it very well, with much fire and decision. He talked a good deal, encouraged and drawn out with lazy interest by his friend, who looked at him the while as if he thought that so much wholly unnecessary energy was a phenomenon indeed. And he pulled himself up suddenly as Stephen Mansfield, who had never excited himself over anything in his life, rose finally to take leave.

“I haven't bored you, old man, I hope,”

he said brightly. "You shouldn't have asked questions, you see."

"On the contrary, my dear fellow," returned Mansfield, as he shook hands with lazy cordiality. "You're most refreshing, I assure you. Good-bye; glad to have you back."

Left by himself Norman took out his watch and stood for a moment, considering. The subject of his considerations was evidently subservient to the interest of his previous conversation, for the bright animated expression of his face did not change at all. He stood there looking like a man standing on the threshold of life and work of his own choosing, eager and enthusiastic. He put his watch back in his pocket and said to himself absently :

"I'd better dress, I suppose. I wonder why on earth they dine at seven?"

It was the Friday specified in the note Mrs. Custance had received from him ten days before, and he was preparing to fulfil the engagement he had then suggested. With Norman Strange, as with many other imaginative people, time and separation had no influence whatever over his regard for his friends. Time might and did considerably confuse his mental picture of them ; their names might come to stand for him for an idea, entirely unlike the reality ; but towards that idea he would have felt at the end of ten years of separation and silence precisely the same degree of kindness that he had felt for the reality at the beginning. His first letter to Mrs. Custance on the subject of Alice Eade had suggested to him the keeping up of a correspondence with her which—on his part—had alternately flourished and languished but which had never wholly died

out. The last of her dull, conventional letters had followed him about the world, and had finally reached him at San Francisco about two months since. It had told him of their move to London, and, knowing Mrs. Custance and her husband to be thus easily within reach on his return home, to go and see them had been his natural impulse.

It was half-past six when he came back again into his sitting-room in evening dress evidently absorbed in thought. He crossed the room quickly, and taking up a magazine that lay on the table, began to look up some statistics connected with a scheme on which his talk with Stephen Mansfield had started his thoughts. He laid the magazine down again hastily and reluctantly, with an obvious sense of obligation, and was leaving the room, when he stopped suddenly.

“Why, I had nearly forgotten the little

woman!" he said to himself. "Where did I put those things?" And turning quickly he ransacked two drawers and a cupboard, finally produced two fascinating-looking paper parcels, and ran downstairs with them in his hand.

CHAPTER IV.

His scheme, or rather schemes—for he had several in his mind—and his statistics, engrossed Norman Strange entirely, as his hansom took him quickly through the streets, and as the pace slackened and the horse was finally pulled up he had to recall himself abruptly to the present.

“Rather a dreary house!” he said to himself, becoming suddenly aware of his surroundings, as he jumped out of the cab. “What’s Custance doing, I wonder? He wasn’t a bad sort.”

It was with the quickened interest natural to the position, pleasant without

being in the least exciting, that he waited for the opening of the door, went upstairs after the maid, and followed his name quickly into the drawing-room. Alone there, having evidently just risen from the chair by which she stood, was the little awkward figure which had become a faint outline in his memory, and he went up to it rapidly with eager courtesy.

“How very nice this is!” he said. “It is a hard matter for friends to meet, isn’t it, Mrs. Custance? but it is all the more delightful, I believe, when they do.”

“It—I am very glad to see you,” she murmured.

She had held out her hand as he came up to her, and her eyes were fixed on his face as he spoke. All the wistfulness, all the apathy were gone from them, and they, as well as the pale, tired face from which

they looked, were still and quiet with absolute content. She did not look pleased, she did not show active feeling of any kind, and she had spoken her conventional greeting mechanically ; but her passivity was that of perfect satisfaction in the present moment, asking nothing more.

“It is very good of you to let me invade you like this,” he said. The dulness and awkwardness of her reception of him was giving substance and colour to the shadow of her that had existed in his memory. The nervous little woman of five years before was becoming once more familiar to him, and his voice had insensibly acquired something of the old ring with its hint of something that was half patronage and half protection, and altogether kindly and manly. “I thought you might possibly decline to have anything to say to me after the length

of time that has gone since I had your last letter." He laughed, and then continued cheerily, indicating the parcels which were still in his hand : " I met these small objects in San Francisco, Mrs. Custance. I hope you will accept them and think them pretty."

He put the parcels on the little table beside her as he finished, and surprise seemed suddenly to break up the quiet of her manner.

" For me!" she stammered, " you brought them for me !"

" If you will have them," he answered gaily, and then she seemed to pull herself up, trying, as it seemed to him, to master her shyness ; and turning to the table she undid the dainty white paper with nervous fingers.

" Oh!" she said, as the contents were disclosed, " oh!"

He had brought her an elaborate box

of bonbons, all velvet and silver, and a little figure in Sèvres china—a woman's figure in a delicate dress, with a delicate face and head coquettishly turned on one side. The contrast between the dainty toys and the woman who stood looking at them and touching them almost as though they frightened her was inexpressible.

“It is—thank you very much,” she said at last, lifting her eyes to his face; and Norman, on whom a vague sense of the incongruity of his present had suddenly struck, laughed again and changed the subject lightly.

“Tell me all your news,” he said pleasantly, sitting down on a chair near her. “How do you like living in London? Do you ever hear from Thornsdyke now?” He paused a moment. The subject which, during the first six months of his London

life, had been his one link between the present and the past, came naturally back to his mind now that the past was brought again before him, and he said in a lower, graver voice: "Have you ever heard of Alice Eade?"

Mrs. Custance shook her head. During those six months Norman had done his utmost to trace the missing girl and had done it in vain. From the moment of her departure in the train from Wellborough no clue to her whereabouts had been found. And no one in Thornsdyke had seen or heard of her from that day to the present.

"I hoped she would come back!" Mrs. Custance said sadly. "I hoped perhaps she might write to me, but she never did!"

The sad little answer was followed by a moment's pause, and then Norman roused

himself from the painful thoughts which the topic had brought him and said cheerfully :

“ And how do you like—— ”

He was interrupted. The door behind him opened suddenly, and he broke off and rose quickly as Dr. Custance came into the room, followed by a young clergyman whom Norman did not know.

“ Well, doctor, how are you ? ”

“ How are you, Strange ? Excuse my not welcoming you sooner. ”

There was far more cordiality in the doctor's welcome than there had been in that of his wife. There was a look of lazy satisfaction about him altogether as though he had just done a good stroke of work, and was rather elated and inclined to be exceptionally pleasant in consequence. The two men shook hands heartily, and then Dr. Custance said, turning to the young clergyman :

"Let me introduce Mr. Aubrey Chisholm, Strange. Mr. Chisholm—Mr. Norman Strange."

Aubrey Chisholm was looking very tired and depressed, and he hardly smiled as he acknowledged the introduction. He had come in to see Dr. Custance, half an hour before, at the end of a hard day's work, hoping to hear that satisfactory negotiations on the subject of a loan to the Essendine trust had actually been opened with the capitalist whose name he had introduced so triumphantly ten days before. Dr. Custance had informed him pleasantly that he had seen the gentleman in question and that there was not the slightest hope of his doing anything—not thinking it necessary to inform him likewise that he himself had taken care by his representation of the case to bring about this result—and the disappointment

had been a heavy one. Dr. Custance, as part of the exceeding pleasantness with which he always thwarted the young man's plans, and thinking that the presence of a third man would involve a saving of trouble to himself in the entertainment of Norman Strange, had asked him to stay to dinner; and Aubrey, discouraged and heart-sick, had realised that his midday meal of that day had been somehow or other forgotten, and had accepted wearily.

He was apologising to Mrs. Custance for his unexpected appearance in the drawing-room as the other two men exchanged the commonplaces of the situation, and he was wondering whether or no to apologise also for his working coat, confused by the fact that though Norman Strange was in evening dress, Dr. Custance was not. The incongruity had evidently struck Dr. Custance

himself, and there was a shade of annoyance on his hitherto unusually genial countenance as they sat down to dinner a few minutes later.

“I’m sorry you troubled to dress, Strange,” he said. “Leila, you should have reminded Mr. Strange that it didn’t matter.” He glanced across at his wife as he spoke with the expression which usually brought a look of frightened anticipation to her face. This evening, however, she hardly seemed to hear his words, and Norman answered lightly :

“Thanks very much, but it was no trouble at all. I’ve been a stranger in strange lands—and very hospitable lands, too—for so long that the formality of dress clothes has become second nature to me, and I’ve almost forgotten the ways of home!”

His smile and tone as he spoke gave the

words a most graceful significance, and threw over Dr. Custance's slovenliness a guise of friendliness which it by no means deserved. Aubrey Chisholm, sitting opposite him, felt himself attracted, in spite of his fatigue and depression, to the stranger of whom Dr. Custance had only said to him before dinner :

“You'll meet a Mr. Strange, an old patient of mine.”

He looked across the table, his haggard greenish eyes very frank and ready to be friendly, and said simply :

“You have been travelling, Mr. Strange ?
I envy you.”

“Yes, I've been travelling for the last ten months !” returned Norman readily. He paused in his proceedings with the fish on his plate for a quick, keen glance at the young clergyman, and decided impulsively that he looked a “good sort of boy.” “I

came last from America. What a number of Americans there are in London just now!" He turned to Mrs. Custance as he spoke, but she apparently thought that she had made all the response necessary by turning her face towards him, for she did not speak, and her husband said :

"You don't find London much altered in ten months, I imagine."

"Does it contrast favourably with the other great cities you've seen?" added Aubrey Chisholm, with a sigh, as he thought of his own individual corner of London, which certainly could not contrast favourably with anything.

It was inevitable in such a party that Norman should be the chief talker, both as traveller and elder guest, and also as the most capable, enthusiastic, and imaginative of the quartet. And he filled his part

admirably ; never allowing himself to be more than just sufficiently personal in his description and reminiscences , never allowing any one of the other three to drop behind or out of the conversation. He got little help from either his host or hostess. Dr. Custance ate his dinner and listened suavely and indolently, very well pleased to have all trouble taken off his hands. His wife hardly spoke, though she ate nothing, and her eyes were never turned from Norman as he talked. But Aubrey Chisholm, rested and refreshed by the bright talk about men and things and the change it gave him, responded readily ; and Norman, in the absence of any other obvious interest and sympathy, found himself instinctively addressing himself to his fellow-guest, counting upon his comprehension and response, until, by the time dinner was over, each felt his heart warm towards the other

as it might have done after an hour's congenial tête-à-tête.

"You can have no idea until you've seen it," said Norman finally, concluding an answer to a question from Aubrey Chisholm about Australia with a glow and enthusiasm which he seldom showed now to a comparative stranger; "You can have no idea until you've seen it of the beauty of the country there. Miles upon miles of the most perfect vegetation under the most inconceivably lovely sky; an atmosphere of which we in this country know nothing; trees, flowers, shrubs of all kinds, a perfect luxury of colour everywhere; birds for the shooting, beasts for the hunting, the whole thing waiting, as it were, for man, to give it perfect value."

"Ah," responded the young clergyman, with a long-drawn sighing breath, and Dr. Custance turned his head slowly and looked

at him. There was a little smile on his face, as he did so, that was almost a sneer.

“When the Essendine trust is worth a thousand a year, Chisholm,” he said, “we will send all your parishioners to this earthly paradise.”

Dr. Custance’s indolent words were prompted by all the insolent security of conscious triumph. He was very well satisfied with the blow he had dealt Aubrey Chisholm and his schemes earlier in the evening. “The young meddler would keep quiet for a little while now,” he had told himself; and the pleasantness of his tone concealed a taunt which he lazily enjoyed.

Aubrey Chisholm’s simple ears did not catch the taunt, but the light, callous touch on what was to him so painful a subject made his pale face flush hotly, and he looked steadily down at his plate as he answered in a low voice :

“It would be an earthly paradise to them, Dr. Custance!”

There was a certain dignity and pathos in his manner as he spoke, which struck Norman Strange, and he said interestedly :

“Are you an upholder of emigration, Mr. Chisholm? It is a subject that has interested me immensely since I have known the colonies. If your parish is in London you must come across many cases, I am sure, for which it would be the only remedy.”

The sympathetic tone and manner, coming on Dr. Custance's careless handling, fell on the boy's sore heart with an instantaneously opening touch. He lifted his head and answered with an enthusiasm which astonished Norman, and interested him still further.

“I do,” he said. “My curacy is in the poorest part of South London, Mr. Strange

—a part as wretched as the east, though less is known about it. Mrs. Custance will tell you about it, too,” turning to her deferentially. “There are courts into which I could take you, courts where men and women are crowded together in such misery and degradation as makes the thought of all that free, open, unused country that you describe, almost more than one can bear patiently; and when I think——” he stopped suddenly. There was no excuse for his inflicting his private disappointments on a comparative stranger, he told himself. It was Dr. Custance who said, with the same little smile with which he had addressed him before, and with the same careless pleasure in giving him pain :

“That capitalist, that capitalist, Mr. Chisholm !”

“What capitalist ?” enquired Norman,

curiously, glancing from one man to the other. "Have you any emigration scheme on hand, Mr. Chisholm, may I ask?"

"No," answered the other heavily, "that is just what I have not, I'm sorry to say. I have rather hoped that I might have." He hesitated a moment, and then, as though drawn out by the expression on Norman's face, he added, with a sudden burst of confidence which was not the less boyish and attractive for the little assumption, which the mention of his parish seemed to involve, of that priestliness which had been almost invisible as he talked to Norman of other matters: "There is a trust in connection with the parish in which I work of which I have had great hopes."

"Leila!" Dr. Custance's voice was a little hard beneath its suaveness. It was one thing to enjoy a little taunting of his

humiliated adversary, and quite another to be bored with the whole story of the Essendine trust. "Leila, are we to have no coffee?"

As though recalled to the duties of her position, Mrs. Custance rose hastily. Her two guests rose also, as a matter of course, and Norman opened the door. He shut it after her, and then, resuming the seat he had left, he said to Aubrey Chisholm, in the tone of a man who really cares to have an answer:

"A trust in connection with your parish, you say? It would interest me immensely if you would tell me the whole story."

"It's short enough, unfortunately," interposed Dr. Custance with a laugh. "It can be told in two words, I am afraid—'No effects.'"

"No, Dr. Custance," returned Aubrey. "It may be told in one word—'Waste.'"

“Now may I have it less epigrammatically?” said Norman, laughing. He looked at Aubrey Chisholm as he spoke, and Dr. Custance leant back in his chair with an air of indolent resignation.

And then Norman Strange had the whole story for which he had asked. Aubrey Chisholm told it well, simply and directly. He told the origin of the trust; he described its present condition, passing over as lightly as possible the fact that Dr. Custance was the official whose salary absorbed the income. He described the state of the land, encouraged and led on by some very pertinent questions from Norman, and then he described the state of the people to whom the trust had been left. Quite carried away by his earnestness, he forgot that he knew nothing whatever of the man to whom he spoke; he simply realised that he was being listened to with

an intent sympathy that seemed to grow with every word he spoke, as Norman leant towards him resting his arms on the table, taking in every word and putting in now a question, now a mere ejaculation, always appreciative and to the point. And Aubrey ended with an earnest appeal to this sympathetic listener to come down to the parish of St. Fabian and see the state of things for himself.

“Only come and see, Mr. Strange,” he said earnestly. “Let me show you one or two, only, of our courts, and you will see what is involved in the question; you will see how horrible it is that this land should lie practically fallow when the need for the money it should bring is so indescribably crying. Of course, I know that there are innumerable societies for the furtherance of emigration, many of them doing excellent

work. But where there is so much to be done it is terrible to think that anything should be wasted, and a fund of our own would have a position with our people which no external society could ever command. Only come and see!"

Dr. Custance knew nothing as to Norman's financial position except the fact that he had "come into a little money," and he was thinking to himself what a fool Aubrey Chisholm was for his pains. Aubrey, who had made his appeal instinctively, without knowing why, drawn on solely by that magnetic power which Norman possessed in no small degree, was waiting breathlessly for his answer. Norman himself was deliberating, as he always prided himself on doing—when he had most impulsively decided.

"I'll come with pleasure," he said finally, stretching out his hand to the young man

with a quick, characteristic gesture of friendliness. "You've interested me more than I can tell you."

He and Aubrey Chisholm walked away from Dr. Custance's house together that night, and before they did so it had been arranged that they should meet the next day at the lodgings of the latter.

"Come about three o'clock," Aubrey had said in a tone full of excitement, though he could have ascribed no good reason for his elation. "Mrs. Custance" — Norman had been telling her of his impending visit, and they were standing close to her at the moment—"Mrs. Custance will be having her sewing class then, and you should see it."

"May I?" Norman had said, turning gaily to her.

And she had answered him simply :

"Yes."

CHAPTER V.

IT was the afternoon following the evening on which Norman Strange had dined at the furnished house in Bloomsbury, and the parish room of St. Fabian's was very quiet; unusually quiet, considering that about twenty of St. Fabian's parishioners were assembled in it, and that such an assemblage usually involved considerable tumult. It was a small room. St. Fabian's, poor in everything else, was poor also in its accommodation for its church organisations, and as these latter grew and developed, they were forced to find homes as they could in such rooms as could be obtained in the more

respectable part of the parish. Its furniture consisted of as many wooden chairs as it would comfortably hold—some people might have said more—and a long table covered with a bright-coloured cloth. It was about five o'clock, and round the table in every variety of heavy uncouthness of attitude that physical weariness could produce, sat some two dozen women occupied, evidently unfamiliarly enough, with needlework; by the side of one large, dull-looking woman, from whose hands she had just received the grimy piece of calico she held, stood Mrs. Custance.

When Aubrey Chisholm had been licensed to the curacy of St. Fabian's about six months before, such a thing as a lady worker had been unknown in the parish, which was, indeed, only just passing out of a long course of absolute neglect. Aubrey's vicar, a Mr.

Kendal, had himself been only very recently appointed ; and though he did all that one man could, he was the wrong man for the place, inasmuch as he was so shy and so reserved as to be absolutely unable to attract helpers to himself. With Aubrey there had come upon the scene his sister ; and on his first meeting with Mrs. Custance, it had seemed to him the obvious thing, considering her connection with the parish—indirect enough in all truth—to beg of her some of the help so much needed with the girls and women. To be asked for anything was so rare an experience with Mrs. Custance that she was hardly capable of saying no, and her frightened, hesitating protests producing nothing from the young curate but politely eager reassurances, she found herself, hardly knowing how it had come about, pledged at least to visit one or two of the women.

And from those first visits had arisen all that had hitherto given her listless life in London the faintest touch of interest. What it was that attracted her in those miserable lives; why it was that she went again and again to the wretched rooms where poverty-stricken mothers and brutally treated wives dragged through their dreary round of daily life; she could have expressed as little as the women themselves could have told why there were few of them who, after the first, failed to "do" with her, as they expressed it; failed to give her the confidence for which she would never have asked. She had no thought of making their lots easier on any extended scale. Of her confused conviction, with regard to the state of things with which she was thus brought, for the first time in her life, into close contact, the most definite was that of the utter hopelessness of it all. And

they, on their part, were well aware that she was poor herself, in her class, and had nothing to give them. Neither party understood the mysterious magnetism and sympathy of fellow-feeling.

The "working party" assembled about her on this afternoon was no organisation of her own. It had been arranged by Aubrey Chisholm, and she, though shrinking instinctively from the numbers and the formality, and much preferring her own unobtrusive visiting, had not known how to resist. He had spoken of it in the first instance as a "mothers' meeting," and her nervous distress at the idea had made it obviously impossible. He had given it up, greatly disappointed, but a day or two later he had presented the plan in a new guise, evidently not of his own devising, and with a less aggressive title, and she had drifted into

it simply enough. If, as he assured her, it was really a rest and a change for the poor women to sit together in the parish room, she could not put difficulties in their way.

It was a sad enough sight that “class” of hers. It was composed entirely of women between twenty and forty years of age, and being so, it should have represented womanhood under all its most beautiful aspects; at its dawn with all the gracious promise of dawn, in its maturity in all the dignity of that promise fulfilled. And of all those twenty women, young and old, there was not one in whom the womanhood was not debased and marred; not one on whom sin and poverty—her own sin or that of her fellow-man—had not set its mark; not one in whom the spark of God, set in each one of His creatures, was not trampled and thrust down, pressed upon by the

constant presence of grinding care, choked by constant contact with all that is most sordid and most earthly in man's life, until its presence was hardly to be traced. They were the best and the least degraded of the women of a London slum.

"That is quite right now, Mrs. Dean," said Mrs. Custance, returning the work she held to its owner. Her manner was less embarrassed and uncertain with these women, whose misery had drawn her to them, than any one else had ever known it; but all her gentleness remained, characteristic and unconscious. Her insignificant personality seemed to stand out in it in strange distinctness against the heavy, brutalised roughness by which she was surrounded; just as her little neat, dowdy figure stood out against the dirt, dishevelment, and general squalor of the women among whom she moved.

“I shall mess it all up agin d’reckly!” said her pupil hopelessly.

Mrs. Dean was sitting at the corner of the table nearest the open window. She straightened herself up with an effort, and as she did so her dull glance fell upon the street below ; a narrow, squalid street, where grimy, half-clothed children were playing and fighting among refuse and litter of every sort and kind, and which looked in the heat and dust of that summer afternoon wretched beyond description.

“There’s Chisholm with a swell with him,” she said with a curious mixture of natural curiosity and the apathy induced by hopelessness. “What’s he want, now?”

The woman on the other side of the table, a young woman miserably worn and haggard, raised her eyes on the words and glanced also out of the window. Aubrey

Chisholm and Norman Strange had just come out of a doorway opposite and were standing together in the street, the former talking earnestly.

"I see 'em go by nigh on an hour ago," said the young woman, "an' then they come back and went into Brown's. Ah, they're going into Gibson's, are they! Mrs. Gibson'll give them what for, I reckon! She's been on the spree these three days now!"

Mrs. Custance had been standing just behind Mrs. Dean, and her eye had caught the pair in the street below before the woman spoke. She had stood motionless, looking at them for an instant, and then she had turned to another woman and her work with the content that had stilled her face on the previous evening grown so strong that it was like a faint light of happiness. She raised her head as the young woman

finished her speech, which had been plentifully sprinkled with vigorous and unornamental adjectives. She did not speak, but apparently the hesitating face she turned towards the woman was enough, for the latter said roughly :

“There, I didn’t go for to worrit you, Mrs. Custance. It’s habit, that’s what it is ; but I’ll look out carefuller.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Wright,” was the gentle answer. Mrs. Custance had no thought of teaching or dictating, only she could not help being hurt by bad language, almost as much as she would have been hurt by a blow. Then she sat down at the head of the table, and took up the story-book which always occupied the last half-hour of the “class.”

The content, so strange to it, that was upon her face when she began was upon

it still when, half an hour later, she finished, and rose with a few gentle words of regret that the time was up. The class folded up its work and rose too, and then each woman wanted an individual parting word with Mrs. Custance; with many of them the want was only the form taken by the rough, kindly instinct of not "slighting" her which she inspired in all of them, and which was at least as softening an influence in their brutalised lives as any sermon on her part would have been. They had gradually dispersed, however, and she was standing in the hot, close room talking to the last lingerer—the young woman who had promised to be "carefuller" of her language — when the door opened, and Aubrey Chisholm and Norman Strange appeared, and stopped short.

"I beg your pardon," said Aubrey

Chisholm. "I would not have interrupted, but I thought the class was over, Mrs. Custance."

"It is over," she returned, all its hurry and timidity returning to her manner as she spoke to him, though her face did not lose its peace. "That is, if you want the room, Mr. Chisholm, we can go downstairs."

"I don't want the room!" and "There ain't nothin' more for me to trouble you over!" came simultaneously from the curate and the young woman, and with an awkward salutation the latter took leave of Mrs. Custance and shuffled out of the room.

"I'm really very sorry, Mrs. Custance," continued Aubrey apologetically. "We have been watching your class come out, and I quite thought they were all gone. I have been telling Mr. Strange what a success it is."

He turned to Norman as he spoke, and there was something in his manner which differed considerably from his manner to him the night before. It was at once wistful, expectant, and restrained.

Norman himself had not moved since they entered the room. He was very white ; his eyes were bright and dark ; and on his sensitive, impressionable face there was a stamp of horror. He lifted his hand as Aubrey spoke to him, pushed the hair from his forehead with a movement of intolerable oppression, and took a long breath of the stifling air.

“A success!” he said. “Those miserable women shut up for an hour in this baking room a success!” He stopped himself abruptly. “I beg your pardon, Chisholm,” he said, and then he walked across the room to the window, and stood there

with his back towards them looking out. Mrs. Custance's blue eyes followed him doubtfully, and Aubrey Chisholm said in a low, straightforward tone :

"I have been showing Mr. Strange some of our courts, and it has been a painful revelation to him, I'm afraid."

"Painful!" exclaimed Norman impulsively, turning and facing them. "Painful! You've shown me what will haunt me as long as I live. You've shown me——"

He pulled himself up, evidently restraining his vehemence with a high hand, and turned to the window again, and the silence that followed seemed to be strangely dominated by the fiery emotion which he was holding still and mute, and to be maintained by the other two out of a vague respect for something that they hardly understood. It was broken at last by Aubrey

Chisholm, who was evidently desirous of putting things on a more ordinary footing.

“You will want to be getting home, Mrs. Custance,” he said. “We had better make a move, I think. Can you tell me where my sister is? It is time she went home, too. Mr. Strange,” he added, turning towards Norman, “I should like to introduce you to my sister. Shall we all go and look for her?” He moved to the door as he spoke and waited for Mrs. Custance to pass out first.

“Miss Chisholm is in the new room with the children,” she said shyly; and then she went down the stairs, followed by the two men, and led the way up the unsavoury street until she came to a house which was rather tidier-looking than the rest. She hesitated then and glanced nervously at Aubrey.

“We may as well go in,” he said. “She ought to have sent them home by this time.”

He passed through the open door of the house as he spoke and went along the dingy passage, Mrs. Custance following him meekly, and Norman Strange bringing up the rear rather reluctantly. Aubrey opened a door at the far end, and as he did so they heard for an instant—in audible before in the incessant turmoil of the street behind them—the sound of a bright, sweet girl’s voice above a confused babble of little children. Then the voice stopped suddenly, as Norman Strange stopped no less suddenly on the threshold of the room.

He was looking into a small room, little less dingy and perhaps worse as to atmosphere than that in which Mrs. Custance’s class had assembled, but bright with happy children’s faces and faintly scented with

flowers. Round and round the room, in a confused, straggling kind of unending procession of two and two, numbers of small children were dancing and hopping. They were all dirty; they were all ragged; they were nearly all white and thin; but every little face was beaming and bubbling with smiles and laughter, and the scent of flowers came from the handful grasped by each little grimy fist. They were cheap, ordinary flowers enough, and they were evidently a feature in the game that was going on, and precious treasures to the children. The interest of the game apparently culminated in the middle of the room, and there, with a too-small mite in her arms, the nearest children clinging to her and pressing round her with uplifted faces, stood a tall girl—the girl whose voice they had heard. Her hat was off and her bright brown hair was tossed and tumbled.

Her face, full of spirit and animation, was flushed, and there was a great tenderness in the clear eyes as they flashed about over the tumbling, laughing groups around her, here, there, and everywhere at once. Her face was towards Norman as he stood in the doorway, and the bright eyes seemed to meet his for an instant before she turned them on Aubrey Chisholm and said, over the heads of the children between them :

“ Oh, Aubrey, is it late? They are so happy, you see ! ”

“ It’s nearly six, Stella,” answered her brother, much more tentatively than might have been expected from his previous authoritative statement that it was time for his sister to go home.

“ Really ? ” she said. “ Then they must go ! Wait for me, Aubrey.”

She spoke the last words rapidly, and she

had turned away from the group in the doorway, and was speaking gaily to the little people round her before Aubrey could accomplish the introduction he was intending. Norman Strange, on a sign from him, followed Mrs. Custance into the room, and they stood on one side as the children began to file noisily out. A few minutes later a sudden quiet seemed to descend as the last group disappeared, and Stella Chisholm, left alone in the middle of the room, came towards her brother.

“Now one can hear oneself speak!” he said. “Stella, I want to introduce Mr. Strange to you. Strange, this is my sister.”

The last words of the introduction might have been a little wanting in formality, but there was a ring of pride and pleasure in them which told as plainly as did the honest green eyes as they turned upon his sister

where Aubrey Chisholm's best inspiration lay. And Norman Strange would have noticed nothing at the moment if form had been altogether wanting. He was looking very much attracted and interested, and he returned the pretty spirited bow with which Miss Chisholm acknowledged her brother's introduction rather eagerly.

"My infant school is very absorbing," she said brightly, her frank eyes resting on Norman's face, as though she had already heard of him and was interested in what she should read there. "I thought it was not five o'clock!"

"I am sure they wish it was not!" answered Norman quickly. "How happy they were!"

"But two hours at a time is enough," suggested Aubrey, smiling. "Stella, I'm going to put you into a hansom at once."

His sister turned to him with a saucy grimace intended for his edification alone.

"You're going to put yourself in, too, Aubrey," she said. "Oh, yes, you are!" she continued, with a confident smile, as the young curate began to protest. And it was no surprise to her other male observer that Aubrey's refusal resolved itself into :

"All right, Stella, just for this once."

"Shall we go, then?" she continued, giving sundry rapid, deft touches to her hair and dress as she spoke, and putting on her hat with a matter-of-course simplicity, about which there was no touch of self-consciousness. "It is rather hot in this room, isn't it, and it would be nice to walk a little, if Mr. Strange is going our way. Mrs. Custance wants to get home, too, I'm sure." She turned as she spoke, with a deference that contrasted prettily with her manner to the

two men, to the little figure standing on the outskirts of the group, and Mrs. Custance lifted a pair of bewildered eyes to the bright girlish face. Her own was very wan and tired-looking, and somehow or other its peace had passed away.

“I—I am—quite ready,” she murmured, and with another impartial “Suppose we go, then,” Stella Chisholm led the way out into the dingy passage.

It was about ten minutes' walk from where they were to the street where cabs and omnibuses were to be found, and it was natural, under the circumstances, that the party of four should split into two couples. When Stella Chisholm emerged into the street she found Norman Strange close behind her, and the two walked on side by side, leaving Mrs. Custance and Aubrey to follow together. There was very little con-

versation between the latter pair. Mrs. Custance seemed more entirely unable even than usual to find responses to her young escort's tentative and rather laboured conversational efforts; and Aubrey, thinking respectfully that no doubt she was tired, finally desisted and left her to her own thoughts, whatever they may have been, as she walked along at his side, her blue eyes resting almost perforce on the couple in front. Between that couple there was no lack of conversation. Their voices were of course inaudible to the two behind; but it was obvious from their manner and gesture that from something said by Norman as they turned up the street — something to which Miss Chisholm had answered quickly, accompanying her words with a little pitiful gesture — they had drifted into animated talk. Absorbed and earnest, they walked

faster and faster; and as their steps grew quicker those of Mrs. Custance walking behind seemed to grow slower, until, when they reached the place where they should have parted and Aubrey Chisholm stopped, he was not surprised to see that the small face of his companion was pitifully white and drawn.

“Why, they’re not noticing where they’re going!” he exclaimed, glancing at the other two, who were still pursuing their way, evidently oblivious of landmarks in the interest of the subject under discussion between them. “Will you wait half a minute, Mrs. Custance, and I’ll bring them back? I’m afraid you’re very tired.”

But Mrs. Custance stopped him.

“No!” she said hurriedly. “Why should you, Mr. Chisholm? Here is my tram.”

She was trembling a little as she got hastily into the vehicle, and her smile was very faint as her lips moved, evidently in answer to Aubrey's apologetic farewell. Her slight, spare figure seemed to shrink and become smaller and more insignificant than ever as she sank back into a corner; and from her face the faint light of happiness that had struggled to declare itself that afternoon had faded, as all light fades, the sun being set.

CHAPTER VI.

It cost Aubrey Chisholm some moments' very rapid walking before he overtook his sister and Norman Strange. His sister was speaking vehemently as he came up to them, and she broke off with an exclamation of self-reproach stronger than the occasion seemed to call for, and which expressed in its different way the instinct against "slighting" Mrs. Custance which was so powerful with the women of St. Fabian's.

"I'm so sorry!" she said. "It was stupid of me. I ought to have said good night to Mrs. Custance."

"So ought I," returned Norman much

more lightly ; " but I dare say she has forgiven us already."

He was looking very animated and interested, and the horror which had been stamped on his face an hour earlier seemed to have given place to more active and inspiring sentiments. There was a moment's pause after his last words, and then he continued, turning to Aubrey :

" I shall see you to-morrow at seven, then, Chisholm. I won't say you've interested me greatly this afternoon, for that's an utterly inadequate form of words. Good-bye !"

The two men shook hands warmly, and then Norman turned to Stella Chisholm, and she held out her hand frankly.

" Good-bye," she said cordially. " I hope you will come and call on us. Aubrey will give you the address."

“I shall be only too delighted,” was the eager answer. “Good-bye, Miss Chisholm. So many thanks to you for our talk. You have given it all a different aspect.”

He waited while Aubrey hailed a cab and put her into it, and as they drove away they saw him hail another and jump in.

There was a whole world of quiet hope and satisfaction mingled in Aubrey Chisholm's honest face as he turned it towards his sister as soon as they were alone; but his conversational intentions were frustrated, as his sister said with bright peremptoriness:

“You're not to speak a single word until we get home, Aubrey. You look like a green-eyed ghost! Yes,” as he opened his lips with the evident intention of disobeying her, “I'm quite sure he was impressed, and I'm quite sure you showed

him everything. Now, be quiet and rest, poor old boy." There was a swift change in the last three words from pretty imperiousness to a tender sympathy, and her brother smiled back into her bright eyes and submitted.

Stella Chisholm was supposed to be very like her dead father, both as to personal appearance and mental characteristics, and in her case the one seemed to be the natural expression of the others. She was tall and admirably proportioned, and her graceful easy carriage, the poise of her pretty head, told, as did the delicately-cut nose and the firm little mouth—which smiled delightfully—of the spirit and fire of which she was full. She was clear-headed and ready-witted; and the broad, white forehead over which the brown hair fluffed and waved, and the set and glance of her eyes were as clever

and capable as the latter themselves were sweet. From their childhood the bond between herself and her brother had been closer than that which binds most brothers and sisters, not only from their mutual instinct of dependence on one another as orphans, but from that strong personal sense of sympathy and affection each for the other, which, when it is united to a close family tie, makes as perfect a relationship as the world can show. And from the days in which the small Aubrey and the smaller Stella had been inseparable companions, in defiance alike of sex, age, and physical stature, it had always been the sister who led and the brother who followed. Stella had led Aubrey in and out of mischief in those childish days ; later, her energy had given form and definiteness to his aspirations towards a clerical life ; now she was his

other and cleverer half in all he did or thought; and these relations between them were so entirely a matter of course that brother and sister alike were hardly conscious of them. It was as natural to Aubrey to go to Stella for advice in important matters as it was to him to submit to her in such trifling matters as the tiny periodical holidays she enforced on him—as on this particular evening. And it was as natural to Stella to back up Aubrey's judgement in greater matters as to forbid him to talk during their drive home. If she tyrannised over him at times it was in the innocent, unconscious imperiousness of unthwarted girlhood, and by no means in any consciousness of her own supericrity. In her heart of hearts she considered that Aubrey's "goodness," for which she had a very tender respect and admiration, placed him far above her.

The brother and sister had been left during their minority—as has been said—to the care of their mother's sister, and with this aunt, the widow of a rich stock-broker, Stella, who was just over twenty-one, still lived. Mrs. Alison was a very worthy woman, but stupid as the Essendine women had been as long as Essendines had existed; a perfectly placid existence had not developed such brains as she had originally possessed, and it was not surprising that Stella, under her mildly affectionate and very helpless supervision, had added touches of wilfulness and independence to her other qualities. Ever since she had passed out of her childhood her aunt had been in the habit of bemoaning—placidly enough—the fact that “Stella never cared what anybody thought, and always would have her own way”; and

never had these traits of Stella's been more pronounced than during the nine months which had followed on her brother's entrance upon his work at St. Fabian's. She had thrown herself into his work with an ardour as great as, and far more demonstrative than, his own. She had laughed and kissed away her aunt's feeble remonstrances as to the terrible danger and impropriety attendant on her going to such shocking places; "slumming" was at this time in its very early infancy, and Mrs. Alison, as she very truly said, had "never heard of such a thing." She had gone in and out among the people with a rashness that might have cost her dear had not her courage and high spirit carried her over the revelations she could not escape, and had not Aubrey been at hand to draw a line beyond which he refused firmly to let her pass.

And of all the interests connected for her with the parish of St. Fabian's none had so fired her imagination and engrossed her thoughts as had the story of the Essendine trust. It was she who had originally unearthed the papers connected with it, and had found out their meaning; and it was she who instigated Aubrey in every effort he had made for its resuscitation. Its possibilities fascinated her, and the fascination grew stronger with every difficulty. She hated Dr. Custance's very name with an utterly unreasoning and feminine hatred for the obstacles he had thrown in the way, and every obstacle rendered her only more zealously enthusiastic and determined to succeed in spite of everything.

She had had a note from her brother that same morning, written on his return to his lodgings after his dinner at the Cus-

tances' the night before, telling her of his fellow-guest's unexpected interest in the subject of the trust, and conveying in an indefinable way his own undefined expectancy and hopefulness. It was as a possible recruit that she had scanned Norman Strange on his introduction to her; it was as a possible recruit, and not at all as a man, that she had made her pretty advances to him, and had talked to him so earnestly during their short walk. She was burning with excitement to know all that her brother could tell her of his new acquaintance—so far, at least, as that acquaintance's characteristics affected her beloved scheme—and it was sheer tenderness for Aubrey's tired face that had made her forbid conversation in the cab.

“We will go up to the school-room for a minute or two before I dress,” she said,

as they entered the house ; and a moment or two later, as she shut upon herself and her brother the door of the dainty little room which had once, in different guise, served them both as school-room, she said : “ Now tell me all you know about Mr. Strange, Aubrey ! Quick ! I suppose he can’t do anything himself, but will he work ? Does he really care ? ”

She was standing with her hand on the door, her whole pose full of verve and animation, keenly conscious that she ought to be in her room dressing for dinner, but unable to resist the temptation of a moment’s tête-à-tête. She had repeated her last words impatiently before her brother answered, in a tone that was almost solemn with his sense of the importance of his words.

“ I had no reason to believe last night that he could do anything himself ; but

what do you think I heard this morning, Stella?"

"Oh, Aubrey, what?"

"I had to go into the Strand this morning and I happened to meet a man named Mansfield—I don't think you know him. I don't know how it came about, but he mentioned Strange's name and I told him that he was coming down to St. Fabian's this afternoon, and he laughed and said, 'Oh, that's to be the newest craze, is it? There's plenty of outlet for capital in those parts, isn't there?' And then he told me, Stella, that Strange came into a fortune about a year ago, and that he's quite a rich fellow."

"Aubrey! You don't mean it! Rich! Rich enough to—to do something, really?"

"I should think so, Stella, if he will."

Stella clasped her hands impulsively, and her cheeks flushed with excitement.

“Oh, he shall! he shall!” she cried vehemently. “He was shocked and horrified this afternoon. He told me so and he was quite white when he said it. And he was so interested, really interested in all I told him; I know he was! We talked about the people all the way, and he asked the kind of questions that showed he understood. Oh, I’m sure if it is put to him—what did he say about to-morrow evening, Aubrey? Are you going to dine with him?”

“Yes,” answered Aubrey. “He asked me this afternoon. He’s an awfully nice fellow, Stella!”

“He’s got to be an awfully useful fellow, Aubrey,” was the impetuous answer. Norman Strange, in the thoughts of this girlish enthusiast, was nothing but a magnificent possibility. “Be clever, that’s a dear boy, to-morrow night, and talk to him very nicely.

And you must ask him to come and dine here—you ought, you know, when you've dined with him! I'll talk to him. Oh, Aubrey, there's the dinner-bell! Go down, dear boy! Tell Aunt Rosa not to wait." And Stella disappeared precipitately.

CHAPTER VII.

WHEN Norman Strange, twenty minutes after parting from Aubrey Chisholm and his sister, re-entered his own room, it was just twenty-four hours since he had left it on the preceding evening to keep his engagement with the Custances. He had hardly been in it since, and as he threw himself down in an easy-chair, his hands clasped behind his thrown-back head, his legs crossed, he felt vaguely that a great deal had happened in the interval. Beside him lay the magazine from which he had hardly been able to tear himself on the evening before. He took it

up idly now, glanced at it, and threw it down again. He had received new impressions; new trains of thought had been presented to him since he had looked at it last, and the thread of his interest was broken. There was nothing definite or connected in his thoughts as he sat there; he could hardly be said to be meditating, so passive was his brain. But he was in one of those states of receptivity—vaguely but entirely engrossed by the new ideas of the last twenty-four hours—which occasionally alternated in his sensitive and impressionable temperament with his normal enthusiasm and vehemence. His schemes and interests of yesterday were temporarily suspended while he absorbed his new impressions.

He had been attracted and a little moved by Aubrey Chisholm on the previous evening, and the story of the Essendine trust had

touched his imagination and had interested him greatly ; the picture of the people drawn by the young curate had appealed to his quixotism. But the somewhat dilettante though perfectly genuine interest which had led him to make the appointment to see the parish, had been altogether swept away and obliterated by the realities with which he had been brought face to face on keeping that appointment. The horrors which he had seen haunted him, as he had said they would, even as he sat there in his easy-chair, and they would hardly have allowed him to sit there at all had they been the latest impression received. But this was not the case. Mingled with them, incongruous enough but indescribably softening, there came to him in a confused series of pictures the thought of a girlish face and figure, and he found himself wandering from the inex-

pressible things he had seen with his own eyes, to the less terrible, but hardly less pitiable, statements made him by a girl's musical voice burning with fervour and indignation. The remembrance of Stella Chisholm and the remembrance of the sights he had seen were inextricably blended in his mind; during the rest of that evening and throughout the following day they dominated his thoughts to so great an extent, that when he met Aubrey in the evening at his club, it seemed to him as though the meeting brought him once more in touch with the real interest of his life—the interest which had been only overlaid during the day; and very soon after they sat down to dinner he turned to the subject of St. Fabian's parish. Aubrey was, of course, more than ready to respond. He was rendered a trifle awkward and solemn by

the injunctions with which Stella had endeavoured to prepare him to make the most of his opportunity ; and his introduction of the Essendine trust into the conversation was a distinctly nervous business. But to his great relief Norman Strange took up the subject eagerly.

And Norman's questions were interested and pertinent. For him, too, as for Stella Chisholm, there was a touch of fascination about the latent possibilities presented by the trust. There was something to him almost tantalising about the thought of all that motionless machinery hanging stubbornly useless, clogged by years of neglect, and it had a strong charm for him. Before dinner was over he had heard every detail connected with the trust, and had arranged to go down with Aubrey Chisholm on that day week to see the land. He had also accepted Aubrey's

invitation to dine at Mrs. Alison's on the same day.

The work which he had mapped out for himself, on his first return to England, went rather heavily with Norman during the intervening week. His usually ready enthusiasm lagged, except when his labours led him into consideration of the condition of the poor, or on those by no means rare occasions when he drifted, with no apparent leading, into a study of subjects connected with emigration. Perhaps it was because he found on one of these occasions that he was drifting further than he had intended, that plans had taken shape in his mind almost without consciousness on his part, that when he eventually met Aubrey Chisholm at King's Cross on the morning agreed upon for their visit to the trust lands, he was under the influence of a strong tide of reaction.

It was an hour's journey from King's Cross to that part of Hertfordshire for which they were bound, and before they reached their destination Aubrey Chisholm, though his steady-going temperament was by no means sensitive in such matters, was vaguely conscious that his companion's interest in the object of their journey had cooled. He himself received no encouragement to talk about the trust, and the few words spoken by Norman on the subject were careless in comparison with the keen interest he had previously displayed. Aubrey's first sense of chill grew upon him as they walked about the land they had come to see—every detail of which, notwithstanding his apparent carelessness, Norman took in almost unconsciously—and by the time they were once more in the train the boyish face was clouded with disappointment. Few words had been

spoken by either Aubrey or Norman when, just before they reached London, Aubrey tentatively and awkwardly produced a paper from his pocket.

“ I suppose you don’t care to take this,” he said hesitatingly. “ It’s a sort of final synopsis of ways and means. I thought, perhaps——”

He stopped. He felt as though it would be taking a liberty with his companion, who after all, as he told himself, had never “ said anything,” if he told him that he, at Stella’s instigation, had drawn out the paper in order that the possible supporter of their project might have the case in a nutshell to decide upon.

“ Thanks,” returned Norman, as he took the paper. “ It’s very good of you to have taken so much trouble to satisfy my curiosity.”

He opened the paper carelessly as he spoke and glanced at it. He had worked out for himself in the course of the past week, idly and roughly enough, all the statements made in it as to the approximate expenses of farming the land and the probable return. And the realisation, brought home by the fact that the paper contained nothing really fresh to him, that he knew practically as much about the affair as did its most ardent promoter, made his face additionally imperturbable with the fresh access of reaction it brought him.

“Thanks,” he said again, returning the paper to Aubrey, a proceeding on which the disappointed face took on several fresh shades of disappointment. “Here we are,” he added as the train drew up at the platform. “Well, Chisholm, see you this evening?”

The last words suggested a very pleasant train of thought to Norman, and his face was very bright as he parted from Aubrey and went his way down the platform. Of the depression he had produced in the young man he was entirely unconscious. It was characteristic both of his modesty and of a certain headlong oblivion of everything but the subject immediately in hand, that it had never occurred to him that his words and actions were of any consequence, or that Aubrey might have founded hopes on him. He thought very little more about the Essendine trust as he walked home. He was quite aware in his secret heart that he had mastered all the pros and cons of the question, and for the present his thoughts were dwelling vaguely and exclusively on the evening before him.

Aubrey Chisholm meanwhile had turned

with a heavy heart in the direction of Gloucester Terrace. He had protested, when the dinner in prospect had been arranged by his sister, that he was taking far too many "evenings off"; but his objections had been overruled by his bright-eyed autocrat, and Stella was waiting for him alone in the drawing-room to give him a cup of tea and to hear his news.

"I'm very sorry, Stella, dear," he said deprecatingly in answer to her eager question. "I'm afraid nothing will come of it."

"Nothing will come of it!" exclaimed Stella. "Why, dear old boy, how out of heart you look! Tell me all about it! After all it isn't such a terrible thing if it is a failure. We must just try again as we've done before."

He told her "all about it." That is to say, he told her that Norman Strange had

seemed to care nothing about the business and had hardly looked at the land. And when he had made these statements—with a good deal of circumstance—there was a pause, and Stella sat contemplatively playing with a teaspoon. At last she roused herself.

“After all,” she said, “the poor man must have time to think it over, Aubrey. We shouldn’t feel safe if he rushed at it.”

“No,” returned Aubrey dubiously, but less despairingly. The fact of having confided his bad news, Stella’s cheery contemplation of the possibility of trying again, and something altogether hopeful and capable about her, had revived his spirits. There was another moment’s pause, and then Stella said in a business-like way, as though wishing to be sure of her facts :

“Has anything definite been said be-

tween you as to the possibility of Mr. Strange's doing anything?"

"No," said Aubrey, "nothing of that kind."

Stella tapped her spoon gently against a saucer, contemplating the proceeding with reflective eyes.

"Well," she said finally, rising with a brisk, graceful movement, "we ought not to be in a hurry, Aubrey. It's right for a man to think things over carefully, you know!" The bright, confident face suggested that in Stella Chisholm's eyes it was equally right that a man's conclusions, the thinking process accomplished, should agree with her own. "Now it's time we went to dress."

Stella, with whom all such matters rested in her aunt's house, had given some little thought to the composition of the dinner-

party on this occasion. Mrs. Alison was in mourning, so it was necessarily small, and it had finally resolved itself in Stella's mind into "Mr. Scott for Aunt Rosa, and Minnie Leighton for Aubrey, and then I can talk to Mr. Strange." The news brought her by her brother by no means altered her intention of "talking to Mr. Strange," but it added the spice of difficulty to her expectations, thereby rousing all her spirit and fire. She was looking unusually bright and charming as she came out of her room in a pretty dinner dress, her eyes sparkling and her cheeks a little flushed, and ran downstairs to the drawing-room.

Mrs. Alison and Aubrey were alone there when she entered. Mrs. Alison in person was a large lady, with a large and hardly wrinkled face, which was still insipidly pretty, and ridiculously like the face of a

girl of seventeen seen through a magnifying glass. She looked up placidly as her niece came towards her, and apparently contemplated making an observation at some future date. But before she could carry her intention into execution the door opened, and the servant announced :

“ Mr. Norman Strange.”

Norman's introduction to Mrs. Alison was a brief and simple ceremony. She received him exactly as she would have received any fellow-creature presented to her, from a scavenger to a crown prince, with placid absence of interest ; he made his bow and expressed pleasantly and courteously his pleasure in being in her house, and then he turned to Stella. She held out her hand to him cordially, with a little smile, and just as the conventional greeting passed between them the door opened again,

and his two fellow-guests were announced. Mr. Scott was rather a ponderous middle-aged man, an old friend of Mrs. Alison's; and the girl who came in with him—alluded to in Stella Chisholm's thoughts as Minnie Leighton—was the daughter of Mrs. Alison's next-door neighbours, an intimate of Stella's, originally because they had been a great deal together as children.

Neither Miss Leighton nor Mr. Scott were gifted conversationalists, and the talk during dinner was more or less general. It was kept well together by Stella, and she was ably seconded by Norman Strange, who sat at Mrs. Alison's left hand with her niece on his other side. Stella's talk was always vivid and original, and to-night, probably because she found her neighbour unusually responsive, she was unusually amusing. His instant comprehension quickened her wits,

and his tendency to argument made her delightfully mettlesome. There was nothing approaching a tête-à-tête between them, however, until dinner was nearly over, when a spirited discussion on the manners and customs of the uneducated American, Stella attacking and Norman defending, had created much merriment among its auditors.

“I don’t care,” Stella had asserted frankly, beaten at every point and standing to her guns with the feminine incapacity for being convinced by argument sitting very prettily upon her. “Everything you say may be perfectly true, Mr. Strange, no doubt it is—but the fact remains that they are a horrid people!”

And as she turned her laughing face upon Norman, Aubrey turned to Miss Leighton with the sentiment that “Stella never knew when she was beaten,” and Mr. Scott began

to relate to Mrs. Alison a long anecdote illustrative of American virtue.

“I am sorry to be obliged to disagree with you, Miss Chisholm,” said Norman, also laughing. “Can we not agree to differ?”

Aubrey and Miss Leighton had drifted into the stock argument on obstinacy and firmness, Mr. Scott’s anecdote seemed likely to be a work of time, and Stella, after a glance round the table, lowered her voice a little, and said :

“I dare say it may be possible, and at any rate it is possible to change the subject. To do the latter rather abruptly, Mr. Strange, I am very anxious to know what you think of our chances?”

She looked him frankly in the face, and there was a moment’s pause before Norman answered. He was thinking how uncom-

monly pretty she was, and he did not understand her words.

"Your chances, Miss Chisholm?" he repeated interrogatively.

"Yes," she answered. "The land, Mr. Strange. What do you think of it?"

She spoke very anxiously and earnestly, and as he met her eyes all the interest in the subject which had lain in the background of Norman's thoughts during the past week, and which had been in abeyance only during the last twenty-four hours, rose suddenly, and became at once definite and resistless.

"What do I think of it?" he said slowly. "I think very well indeed of it. You are interested in it, Miss Chisholm, are you not? I should very much like to talk it over with you."

At that moment Mrs. Alison made a leisurely move and Stella rose.

“We will,” she said; “by-and-by. Don’t let Aubrey and Mr. Scott keep you long,” and with a smile she left him.

Norman did not let Aubrey and Mr. Scott keep him long, and a very short time had elapsed before the three men appeared in the drawing-room. A few minutes later Miss Leighton, who was a good pianist and always pleased to play, was embarked on a long sonata in the inner drawing-room; Aubrey was listening happily; Mr. Scott was established by Mrs. Alison, prepared to prose until ten o’clock; and Stella and Norman Strange were practically tête-à-tête.

Stella’s cheeks were very bright now that her moment was really come. If in her anticipation of that “talking to Mr. Strange” which had been, for her, the object of the dinner-party, she had had any little natural girlish ideas as to finesse, they were

swamped now in her intense interest in the cause at stake. Her native tact and mother wit could not desert her, but her nature was too frank, and her present anxiety was too genuine, to allow of her speech being carefully calculated.

“Mr. Strange,” she began, taking the bull by the horns, as it were, leaning a little towards him in her earnestness, her strong, well-shaped hands clasped together on her knee, “I’m going to ask you a straightforward question, and I hope you’ll forgive me, because I don’t know how to talk to you unless I know the answer. I do it because I care so tremendously about the trust. I’ve thought about it so much, and it is—— Oh, I can’t tell you how dreadful it is to me to think that it’s all being wasted, when so much might be done!” She paused, and then going back upon her

original practical tone and manner, somewhat shaken in her last words, she said: "Perhaps you don't know that I know you could help—I mean you're rich. Have you thought of doing so?"

There was not a trace of self-consciousness in the frank face and earnest eyes, and, little as she knew it, the manner and tone of her speech were charming. As she uttered her question, Norman faced the fact that he had not cared to acknowledge to himself during the past week; the fact that he had thought a good deal of lending money and helping in the working of the Essendine trust; and he knew quite suddenly that his mind was made up. There was a moment's pause, and then he said quietly:

"I have thought of doing so, Miss Chisholm."

Stella drew a quick breath.

“Of course, I know,” she said, “that it is not a thing to decide upon hurriedly—I mean you will have to go into it all carefully first; and I know it isn’t any use to try and make it seem a very good investment for money, though I don’t think you would be likely to lose by it. But, Mr. Strange, you’ve seen the people. Isn’t it dreadful that there should be a means of helping them, a means that only wants just to be set going to do so much, and that it should be nothing but a dead letter? Of course, I know,” she continued, her animation growing as she spoke, “of course, I know that there are heaps of other ways of helping them; but look at the waste. It does seem so wicked not to use what there really is!”

She paused—her cheeks flushed, her eyes

shining with anxiety as she tried to read the expression of his face—and waited for his answer. Norman had listened to her girlish eloquence with his eyes fixed on her and looking as though he were by no means desirous of stopping her. He was, in fact, apparently anxious for more, for he now said quietly :

“You really think that if the trust were set in working order it would be useful?”

“Think so!” returned Stella vehemently. “Why! can there be any doubt? The money would belong to the people; it would be their very own; no help from any emigration society would be like that. And as to emigration itself—oh, it must be the right thing. I’m not thinking of all the poor things who would never be better off anywhere, for whom it’s too late—there are hundreds like that, I know. But there are

so many who only want a chance, who would work, who would be respectable if they could only get a fresh start. And then the children! Think what it would mean to the children! Oh, Mr. Strange, won't you, won't you——"

She stopped abruptly. She had not meant to plead like that. She had meant to be very reasonable, very practical, very matter-of-fact. But as she stopped, drawing back a little, Norman Strange leant forward and said earnestly :

"Miss Chisholm, I have gone into it all carefully; as you say it is not a thing to decide upon on impulse; and I have made up my mind to take the matter up."

"Oh!" It was a long-drawn exclamation of tardily-realised, often-deferred hope; and Stella Chisholm let herself sink back in her chair as the hot colour of intense joy and excitement rushed over her face. There

was a moment's silence and then she continued, looking at him with a radiant smile, which Norman thought the loveliest thing he had ever seen: "I don't know what to say to you! I don't know how to tell you how glad I am. I have made plans, and hoped, and talked to every one who would listen, for so long! I feel as if I ought to thank you for myself!"

The smile deepened, as she finished, into a rather uncertain laugh, and Norman leant forward eagerly and began to speak.

"Let me tell you what I think of doing—of course with Mr. Essendine's sanction," he said, the plans which he had treated as idle day-dreams becoming as he spoke definite and practicable. "I will not bother you with figures—though I dare say you know as much about it as I do—but I propose to lay out on the land as much money as will put it

into a thoroughly profitable condition, and to have it worked for the trust by a competent bailiff, whose salary will be part of my investment. There will, of course, be no returns for the first three or four years, but as I don't contemplate any interest on the money I propose to lend, and shall be quite prepared to spread the repayment over a term of years—say, ten or fifteen—it seems to me that at the end possibly of three, certainly of four years the trust ought to be receiving a very fair and always increasing income.”

Stella Chisholm moved impetuously and clasped her two hands round the arm of her chair.

“It seems too good to be true!” she said breathlessly, her bright eyes looking at him as though they already saw the troops of happy emigrants her imagination conjured

up—the years that must intervene being as nothing to her in her excitement. “Oh, it will be splendid! Mr. Strange, you’ve been to all the colonies, haven’t you? Which do you think the best for emigration really? I’ve read a lot of books and they are so contradictory.”

Norman had read a “lot of books” on emigration, too, during his residence in the colonies, and he responded instantly and enthusiastically to her excited words and looks. They had shipped the whole parish of St. Fabian off to various colonies to their own intense satisfaction, when a general movement of the other members of the party recalled Stella to the present.

“Oh, dear!” she said, as she rose reluctantly, “three years seems a long time for them all to wait in such misery, doesn’t it? I wish we could begin to-morrow!”

“I wish we could,” he said, rather absently it seemed to her. But she could not accuse him of want of interest ; and when—the other guests being gone—she stopped his proposal to depart likewise with a word and a smile, and, calling Aubrey, told him her great news, her manner to the long-looked-for friend of the Essendine trust was an indescribably delightful mixture of cordial friendliness and delicate gratitude.

CHAPTER VIII.

SHORTLY after eleven o'clock the next morning Norman Strange stood on the doorstep of the furnished house in Bloomsbury, having rung the bell with considerable energy; an energy which was further expressed in his alert pose.

"Is Dr. Custance in?" he asked, as the door was opened, and, being answered in the affirmative with the rider: "Leastways master ain't gone out yet, but he's a-goin'," he moved into the hall.

"Will you step in 'ere, sir?" said Susan, opening the dining-room door, and Norman,

“stepping” in response to the invitation, found Mrs. Custance alone.

“How do you do?” he exclaimed pleasantly, crossing the room to shake hands with her. She was sitting facing the light, looking very small and fragile and dull. She rose hastily to meet him and held out a cold little hand.

“How do you do?” she responded.

They had not met since the afternoon a week before in the slums of St. Fabian’s; the afternoon which was destined apparently to mark an era in the developement of his schemes; and he would naturally have reverted to it even if he had not felt, as he did on seeing her, that he owed her a slight apology for his behaviour on that occasion.

“I was so sorry not to say good-bye the other afternoon, Mrs. Custance,” he began lightly; “I hope you forgave me for rushing

on as I did?" He paused, not, however, because he expected an answer, and then continued in a graver tone: "I can't tell you how much I was struck by all I saw that afternoon. In the interest of what Miss Chisholm was telling me I never noticed how far we were going. How much she knows about the people, and how hard she works!"

"Yes, she is there constantly."

"You are there constantly, too, Chisholm tells me," he continued, with a smile. There seemed to him nothing particularly laudable in the fact that she, a humdrum little woman with no particular interests, should "potter about," as he mentally expressed it, with the women of St. Fabian's.

"Oh, I—I go—sometimes," she answered hurriedly, colouring faintly; "I don't do anything."

“I’m sure you do,” he answered, with another smile, rather pleasantly and reassuringly than with any conviction on the subject. And then, all roads leading to Rome, his mind reverted to the subject of which it was full, and he said: “I have a scheme in my head, Mrs. Custance, for which I shall want a great deal done, and I shall come to you for some help. May I count on you? Will you work for me if I ask you to?”

The blue eyes were lifted to his face for a moment as he smiled confidently at her, and she answered quietly:

“Yes.”

She asked no questions and made no comment, and before he could thank her the door opened, and Dr. Custance came in. She rose timidly, and as the two men shook hands the door closed behind her.

A few preliminary sentences passed between Dr. Custance and Norman, based upon Susan's statement that her master was just going out, and then, Dr. Custance having explained he had no special call elsewhere, and Norman having explained that business was the object of his early visit, they sat down, Dr. Custance settling himself comfortably with a cigarette—a solace which Norman refused—and an air of indolent curiosity.

“You will remember,” began Norman in a simple, business-like way, “that when I dined here last week with Aubrey Chisholm, he told me the story of the Essendine trust?”

There was a hardly perceptible pause in Dr. Custance's action as he put his cigarette to his lips, and then he answered:

“Yes, poor boy; so he did.”

“You said—and his statements amply

corroborated you—that the whole thing was at a standstill and must remain so for want of capital.”

“ Yes.”

“ Well, I propose to supply the capital.”

Dr. Custance flung his cigarette into the fender with a sudden movement of irrepres-
sible surprise, and turned sharply towards him.

“ You!” he exclaimed. “ You! Why, you haven’t——”

“ Yes; that’s just what I have,” interposed Norman, smiling. “ You heard, I suppose, that I came into some money last year? It was fifty thousand.”

“ Fifty thousand!” ejaculated Dr. Custance, lying back in his chair again as though hardly able to grasp the fact thus presented to him. “ Great Scott! Fifty thousand! I’d no idea of it!”

“That’s the state of the case,” returned Norman cheerfully. “And now,” he continued, warming a little and becoming less strictly business-like, the main facts being stated, “I come to you as the secretary and treasurer of the affair to talk things over in order that they may be set going at once. I’ve written to Mr. Essendine, of course ; but I rather infer that he won’t trouble to interfere much in the matter, and you and I may practically manage it between us. Now, look here.”

He stopped, searching in his pockets for the papers he had brought with him, and Dr. Custance, turning his mind with evident difficulty from the main idea that had so taken him by surprise, said :

“But you don’t mean to tell me that you’re thinking of throwing away this money of yours on the Essendine trust ?”

“I’m not thinking of throwing it away decidedly. I’m thinking of investing some of it in the Essendine trust land!”

“What interest do you expect to get?”

“None!”

“Then I don’t quite see where the investment comes in.”

“I’ll tell you!” cried Norman suddenly, leaning forward over the table, his arms folded, his face eager and excited. “I can tell you, Custance, because—you know about me. You know how we became acquainted; you know what I was then; and you know that there’s a line in my record that nothing can ever wash out. I threw my life away as wilfully and wickedly as any fool that ever lived, and it was given back to me. I believe it was given back to me that I might do with it what little good in the world a man may; and I invest this money as I

invest all I'm good for, believing that the returns I've got to look for don't lie in riches for myself, but in help, large or small, for other poor wretches who want their lives renewed as mine was."

Norman had spoken rapidly and impetuously, with flushed face and shining eyes. The sense of that "line" was never obliterated in his mind, though there was no touch of morbidness about his recognition of it; the purpose of which he spoke was the background, more or less strongly defined, of all his life. But he had never before spoken of either, and perhaps to no one but Dr. Custance could he have done it. He bent his head over his papers as he finished his unwonted burst of confidence, which had originated in the excitement and elation of the decision to which he had come, and turned them over hastily. Dr.

Custance's eyes were still fixed upon him as they had been while he spoke, and they were no longer indolent. They were the eyes of a man who has received a notion of which he cannot quite see all the possibilities. There was a silence, broken at last by Dr. Custance.

"You mean," he said, "that you look upon the money you propose to give to the Essendine trust as a kind of atonement. It's rather a large atonement, isn't it?"

"It's a black past," said Norman in a low voice.

"And money spent like this will whiten it," returned Dr. Custance gravely. "I see. Perhaps you're right."

There was another short pause, and then Norman, in his ordinary tone and manner, spoke of the figures on the papers before him. During the hour which followed he

explained to Dr. Custance all the details of his scheme ; it had developed since the previous evening and now included the application of some of the money he was to advance to the purposes of immediate emigration. Before they parted Dr. Custance had agreed, no other course being open to him, to meet Norman Strange at the bank on the following day, to give a receipt in the name of the trust for the money to be paid in by Norman, and to transact further business.

But it was not of the Essendine trust that Dr. Custance was thinking when he was left alone at last.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. RALPH ESSENDINE was alone in his library, apparently engaged in a critical and, to judge from his expression of countenance, rather scornful and displeased perusal of the evening papers.

Mr. Ralph Essendine was a widower of many years' standing. He had been much surprised and annoyed at the conduct of the late Mrs. Essendine in dying without having presented him with a son and heir, and he felt that he was visiting her behaviour, as it deserved, on her entire sex by making no second choice. He lived alone in a handsome house near Grosvenor

Place, attended on by a small army of servants. He never felt lonely, for in himself he found the beginning and end of all the interest and importance of the universe.

He was rustling his paper irritably on this particular September evening, and there was that in his pose—he was a portly man of over sixty—which seemed to denote an even unusual degree of self-importance. The whole room, with its handsome, ponderous furniture, seemed to be pervaded by an atmosphere of pompous self-sufficiency, and the little fire in the massive grate seemed to be taking quite a liberty in crackling, and to do it timidly. There was a curious effect of sharp contrast when—their names having been deferentially suggested rather than announced by a low-voiced footman—Norman Strange came in with Aubrey Chisholm.

Mr. Essendine laid aside his paper with the air of a man who had been expecting his present visitors, and rose pompously.

“Mr. Norman Strange, I presume?” he said, and the presumption was apparently eminently disagreeable to him.

“Yes!” assented Norman courteously, but with plenty of dignity. He returned the stately bow with which the acknowledgement was received as he added: “I have to thank you for falling in with my wish for this interview!”

To this observation Mr. Essendine vouchsafed no reply. He presented two fingers to his nephew and then indicated by a wave of his hand his request—or permission—that his visitors should seat themselves. They did so accordingly; Aubrey on the seat nearest him, which chanced to be an arm-chair similar to that from which his uncle

had risen, and in which he looked rather more uncomfortable and anxious than he had looked standing up ; and Norman in a round-backed writing-table chair which he took instinctively, and in which he was instantly quite at home. Mr. Essendine reseated himself, leaning back in his chair, his legs crossed, his finger-tips lightly touching as his elbows rested on the arms of his chair ; and there was a moment's silence. It was broken by Norman. His expression was very keen and restrained, his eyes bright and serious. A certain air of resolution had grown upon him considerably in the five or six weeks that had elapsed since he had stated to Dr. Custance his intention with regard to the Essendine trust.

“As our interview is of my seeking,” he began, speaking with a straightforward gravity, but with a pleasant smile, “I had

perhaps better tell you my business at once, Mr. Essendine. It cannot be told in three words, I am afraid, and it must involve a certain amount of personal detail, but I will be as brief as possible!"

Mr. Essendine inclined his head, signifying that brevity would oblige him, and Norman continued.

"About six weeks ago," he said, "I wrote to you expressing my desire to advance to the Essendine trust the money necessary for bringing the land belonging to it into profitable condition. You were good enough to raise no objection," here Aubrey turned his face quickly towards Norman, "and the preliminary measures are now on foot."

"If I had foreseen when I wrote to you, sir," observed Mr. Essendine, "that trouble and annoyance to myself on the subject of

my ancestor's preposterous bequest would ensue, I should have remodelled that clause of my reply to you which stated, if I remember rightly, that it was no business of mine to interfere with a man who chose to make ducks and drakes—ducks and drakes, sir"—Mr. Essendine became very weighty and deliberate, as though he were well aware of the honour conferred on those lowly fowls by such introduction into his conversation—"with his money!"

"That was your reply, Mr. Essendine," returned Norman imperturbably. "Capital being thus at the disposal of the trust, I was anxious that the practical working should be revived on a small scale, without the inevitable interval of continued stagnation involved in waiting for proceeds from the land. I consulted the secretary and treasurer of the trust, Dr. Custance, and we agreed that,

subject to your consent, a small sum from the funds at his disposal should be applied to the sending out to the colonies in the course of next year of a necessarily very limited number of families."

An ominous redness of complexion exhibited itself on Mr. Essendine's forehead, and Aubrey's countenance fell.

"I am unable to express my disapprobation of so premature and—and—preposterous a scheme!" he said pompously. Any scheme by which old Ralph Essendine's will was rendered effective would have seemed preposterous to his namesake. But the strong dash of precipitancy which characterised the scheme mentioned by Norman, and which would have condemned it in the sight of most elderly men, rendered the first adjective applied to it sufficiently apposite to make Norman, who was well

aware that the idea had originated in the first place in Stella Chisholm's wishes, answer rather quickly :

"It sounds a little premature, I know ; but the distress it was intended to relieve is pressing. I think I could have proved to you its practicability, but I hope to be able to abandon the idea altogether."

"I am pleased to hear it, sir ; and at the same time I take the liberty of suggesting that your interest in the affairs of the Essendine trust is entirely uncalled-for."

Mr. Essendine shot a wrathful glance at his nephew, and Norman hastened to say courteously :

"I know that in one sense that is most true, Mr. Essendine, and I ought to have repeated sooner the apology I offered in my first letter. To come to the point. The thought and research which I was induced

by the scheme I have just mentioned to give to the subject of emigration, has led to the developement in my mind of another and much larger scheme; one in which the Essendine trust itself plays but an unimportant part."

"Indeed!"

"I have been drawn," continued Norman, speaking rather more quickly and earnestly as he approached what had become, in the course of the past month, the absorbing interest of his life, "I have been drawn to compare the relative advantages of emigration, and its elder brother colonisation, and the result of this comparison has been an entire change of my ideas. I have come to the conclusion that all that can be urged in favour of emigration sinks into utter insignificance before the advantages of colonisation. Where emigration

breaks up and divides, colonisation consolidates; where emigration means exile and loneliness, colonisation means another and a larger home. The importance of the combined effort involved in colonisation cannot, to my mind, be over-rated. The scheme on behalf of which I am here to-day, Mr. Essendine, is, briefly expressed, the foundation of a colony.

“My scheme, roughly speaking, is this,” he continued quickly, stimulated alike by Mr. Essendine’s expression of pompously open-mouthed scorn and by Aubrey’s breathless anxiety as to the reception of his words. “There are in Manitoba enormous tracts of country to be bought, roughly speaking, for from eight to ten shillings an acre, and perfectly adapted to the requirements of dairy-farming. I propose that such land should be bought and stocked, and that twenty or

thirty families should be sent out under a competent manager to work cheese manufactories and other co-operative farming industries. Such industries, well managed and started with a sufficiency of capital, cannot fail to pay their way. I do not speak from imagination and desire, but from absolute hard-and-fast facts into which I will go in detail later on."

He paused, and Mr. Essendine interposed with an air of lordly contempt.

"I can only say, Mr. Strange," he said, "that I trust your capital may be commensurate with your capacity for throwing it away."

Norman smiled.

"My capital is not large enough to allow of my working this thing single-handed, Mr. Essendine," he said, "and that is why I am here. I propose that the scheme should be

treated as an experiment as to the results obtainable by wholesale transplantation of the least degraded families of one of the most hopeless parishes in London; the original thirty being taken from the parish of St. Fabian's, Southwark. Regarded from this point of view the scheme becomes of public moment, and public support should be given to it. The whole scheme arose in my mind out of subjects connected with the Essendine trust—the future income of which I propose should be devoted to the development of the colony—and these facts have led me to bring the idea to you. You have money and you have influence. You, if you choose, can practically found this colony, and doing so, can do such a work for the poor of London as many a man without your means would give ten years of his life to do.”

Norman stopped himself abruptly, forcibly restraining the burning enthusiasm which had broken out in his last words. Enthusiasm was not likely to touch his auditor, he knew. His appeal had been mainly directed to Mr. Essendine's public spirit, whereon he hoped to be able to make an impression should he have first convinced him that the financial risks were small. Mr. Essendine's public spirit was, like most of his other worthy qualities, dormant beyond the power of any eloquence to rouse, but, all unknowingly to himself, Norman had touched the one string by which it was possible to work upon him. He had appealed to his self-importance. There was a pause, during which a ponderously mollified expression dawned in Mr. Essendine's face, and then he said, slowly and majestically :

“There is — yes, Mr. Strange, there certainly is something—something, observe, sir—in what you say. Found a colony! A colony! To bear, of course, the founder’s name?”

Norman’s wits were very ready, and he saw the vulnerable spot on the instant.

“To bear, decidedly, the founder’s name,” he replied promptly. “Even if we contemplated anything else the public would never know it by any other, and such a scheme would, of course, be in every one’s mouth.”

“Quite so; quite so,” assented Mr. Essendine with increased majesty. “Well, Mr. Strange, the financial details, sir; the financial details.”

In the course of the next half-hour all the details were put before Mr. Essendine with a lucidity and decision which, in com

bination with certain judicious references to the prospective founder's importance, were strikingly effective. Briefly speaking, Norman proposed that his scheme should be worked by means of a public subscription to be opened by Mr. Essendine ; it was to be called a subscription, since there would be no unconditional guarantee of repayment ; but the contributions, which were to be limited in number, were to be repaid from the profits of the enterprise.

“Of the ultimate success I have no doubt,” said Norman finally. “I have worked out these figures, and I have consulted trustworthy authorities, with the keenest desire to find the flaw—if there be a flaw—before committing myself heart and soul to the business. Difficulties there are, of course ; work there is in plenty ; but the result, if the difficulties are fought

and the work is done, must be success. What that success may mean in the future we cannot tell. For myself, I believe that in its maturity the scheme may prove to be one solution at least of the terrible problem of London poverty. Whether this is so or not, it is an effort at least to lighten the cruel pressure of that problem, and it is only by constant individual efforts in this direction—efforts which are not useless, even if they fail—that there is any hope of ultimate success.”

Norman stopped, and in the silence that followed his words—spoken with the fire stirred in him by his subject almost in spite of himself—Mr. Essendine rose solemnly. Norman’s last sentences had hardly been heard by him; he had grasped the main, practical details, and his mental vision was now fully occupied with a confused but

eminently pleasing picture of himself admired by the world at large as the philanthropic founder of a colony; his scheme in everybody's mouth; the papers full of it; the interest of the nation centred on it. Norman's figures as to the financial practicability of the idea were very convincing, and Mr. Essendine was too shrewd a man of business not to appreciate them. But had they been less sound than they were, it is possible that Mr. Essendine might have considered such notoriety worth a greater risk.

He took two stately turns up and down his library, Norman and Aubrey waiting in silence for what they felt was to be an ultimatum. Then he took up a position on the hearth-rug, his whole personality absolutely inflated with the pride and consequence of the founder in embryo.

“It is not my custom,” he began, “it is not my custom, Mr. Strange, to decide hastily on any matter. I have given your arguments my best attention, and I find them on the surface far from unconvincing. I shall deliberate upon them at my leisure and at some length, and I will communicate to you the result of that deliberation. But,” Mr. Essendine paused portentously, and his sense of importance hardly permitted his articulation of the next words, “but, Mr. Strange, I think I am not ill-advised in telling you that my impressions are distinctly favourable, and that if no contingencies, at present unforeseen, arise in the course of my meditations, I hope to be able to countenance your scheme.”

CHAPTER X.

TEN minutes later the front door of Mr. Essendine's mansion closed behind his visitors, and Norman and Aubrey, turning simultaneously the one to the other, let loose their feelings tersely, but with volumes of excitement in their tones.

"It's done!" said Norman.

"I believe it is!" returned Aubrey.

They moved a few steps down the street, aimlessly, as though the emotion of the moment swallowed up everything else, and then Norman hailed a hansom.

"We must go and tell your sister, Aubrey!" he said, his face alight with eager-

ness and excitement, his eyes glowing with triumph and hope.

And it was not wonderful that they should so glow, for with his success in the interview through which he had just passed, he had grappled with and conquered the first great difficulty in what was now the all-absorbing object of his life. The story of his mental life during the last six weeks had been all told in the explanation he had given to Mr. Essendine of the means by which he had arrived at his present belief in colonisation. He had thrown himself into the study of emigration, urged to it partly by his vivid realisation of the misery he hoped to relieve; partly—though the consciousness of this lay in the background of his mind—by Stella Chisholm's ardour on the subject. And from the moment when the first germ of his present conception had

developed in his mind, it had possessed him as only such a scheme, so full alike of possibilities and impossibilities, so admirable or so insane to onlookers according as success or failure attend it, could possess such a nature. He thought of it, worked over it, dreamed over it sleeping and waking.

To this larger scheme, too, as to his earlier thoughts on emigration, there was an aspect in his mind other than the public and quixotic aspect. Norman's full sense of satisfaction in the barrier passed in his interview with Mr. Essendine was not touched until, after a rapid drive, the hansom drew up at the door of what was now known as the Church House of St. Fabian's, and, dashing hastily upstairs to a room on the first floor, he met the eyes of Stella Chisholm as she turned her face eagerly towards the opening door.

“Well?” she said breathlessly. “Well, Mr. Strange, what news?”

“The best possible!” he answered. “I believe it is as good as settled!”

And as she started impulsively from her seat and he met the answering triumph and delight which sprang into her eyes, Norman tasted the full sweetness of his success.

“Really?” she cried; “really? Oh, how splendid! How splendid!”

“Isn’t it wonderful, Stella?” said Aubrey’s voice eagerly. He had by this time followed Norman into the room. “If only you could have heard him talk!” he continued, indicating Norman with an affectionate, admiring gesture. “He put the whole thing so splendidly that even Uncle Ralph was convinced.”

Aubrey—good, simple fellow—had not

followed the workings of Mr. Essendine's mind, and believed that gentleman to have been converted by Norman's eloquence.

"I wish I could have heard!" returned Stella, turning her frank eyes, full of admiration, once more upon Norman. "Oh, Mr. Strange, I can't tell you how very, very glad I am, or how I do congratulate you!"

"We are all glad!" answered Norman, speaking hastily and gently as he met her eyes. "Don't congratulate me as though I stood alone in this business, please. It is very near to all our hearts, isn't it?"

Then, resuming his former manner, he began to tell her all that Mr. Essendine had said, speaking evidently with an eager desire to put her in possession of all the details. He was half sitting, half leaning on the table as he talked, and that easy, very-much-at-home attitude of his in the

parish room of St. Fabian's was the result—as was the tone of friendly intimacy which the last six weeks had established between himself and the Chisholms—of a great deal of work on his part in the parish; work which had gone on side by side with the developement of his larger schemes. Brought into contact with so much that wanted doing, it was inevitable to Norman Strange to throw himself hotly into the doing of it; and Aubrey Chisholm and his shy Vicar had found themselves countenancing and assisting in measures of which they had long dreamed, but had never had power to execute. All Norman's spare time had been spent in St. Fabian's, and in all his plans Aubrey Chisholm and his sister had some part. And brother and sister alike had gone with him in every step towards the final developement of his new conception

with an enthusiasm little less keen than his own.

The discussion, now, over the interview with Mr. Essendine was long and animated, and it had drifted into much interested talk on other subjects connected with the parish, when a door downstairs opened and shut again, and Aubrey exclaimed :

“Why, that must be Mrs. Custance going home ! What a pity we did not remember that she was downstairs ! She would have been interested to hear the news.”

“So she would,” returned Norman lightly. “And she’s been in the class-room all the time. It’s her dress-making class, isn’t it ?” He paused and smiled—a kindly, pitying, but rather amused smile. “I’m afraid Mrs. Custance is rather afraid of that dress-making class,” he said. It was a branch of

the as yet embryonic technical school which he hoped to establish in St. Fabian's ; and Mrs. Custance had undertaken the class at his request without remonstrance, but with a painful rush of colour to her face.

"The elder women are devoted to her," said Stella quickly.

She rose as she spoke, roused by Mrs. Custance's departure to a sense that it was time that she herself should also go home.

Mr. Essendine's deliberations were favourable. In three days' time Norman was summoned to another audience to receive his decision, and three months later the scheme known to the world as the Essendine Colonisation Scheme for South London, and more briefly and popularly alluded to as the Essendine Scheme, was well under weigh.

By one of those freaks of the public

mind for which it is not possible to account, public interest fastened on the scheme with a leap of excitement as soon as the first rumours of it were bruited abroad. To say by what particular feature of the scheme public opinion was caught, to say in any case why that great authority acts in one way rather than in another, would be presumption. Norman's first magazine article on the subject, for all its picturesqueness, its genuine enthusiasm, and its presentation of incontrovertible facts and figures, might very easily have fallen flat. Instead, it caught the popular fancy. It was talked about, and he found himself instantly with the press at his back. With capitalists, Ralph Essendine's name carried weight, and money began to come in freely.

Through the three months ensuing on his second interview with Mr. Essendine

the work accomplished by Norman Strange was something hardly credible. With all the ardour of his nature he threw himself into the undertaking he had set on foot, and toiled for it day and night. There was no detail connected with it on which he was not an authority, and on which his authority was not the result of thought and study. Nothing was overlooked by him, nothing involving pains and decision was left by him to any other man.

Helpers he had in plenty, capable helpers as well as incapable ones. He was, moreover, helped, or rather hampered, by a committee not ill represented by its president, Mr. Essendine, to which imposing body he was nominally responsible. But he in his enthusiasm, his fiery industry and perseverance, was the life and soul, the mainspring and the centre of the whole affair, and any

branch of it missing his touch and spirit would have languished and failed. The whole organisation rested on him and lived by his exertions.

By the beginning of January matters were so far advanced that negotiations with the Canadian Government were nearly concluded. The list of forty families who were to form the nucleus of the colony—an increase upon the number of Norman's original plan, which had indeed developed and modified itself in various particulars—was, after much labour and difficulty of selection, approaching completion, and April was talked of as a probable month for the departure of the colonists.

As details were sifted and resifted, and difficulties arose, were grappled with, and disappeared, one question came up again and again, until it became the pressing anxiety of

Norman's life—the question of the manager who was to go out as head of the colony. Innumerable proposals were made, innumerable ineligibleibles presented themselves for the post, and it was with the well-satisfied air of a man who finds a knotty problem unexpectedly solved, that Norman, on a cold morning early in January, passed along a narrow passage and opened the door of the room in Long Street, St. Fabian's, that had been rented as the local centre of the Essendine scheme.

“Congratulate me, Mrs. Custance!” he exclaimed, “the man is found.”

It was a large room, furnished mainly with two office tables at either end, one of which presented a formidable array of account - books, official - looking documents, and writing apparatus, and each flanked in the recess on either side of the

fireplace by a couple of shelves holding books of reference on subjects connected with colonisation. Opposite the fireplace hung a map of Canada, and on either side of this were plans and maps of the "Essendine township," as yet existent only on paper. A door at the further end of the room from that at which Norman had entered led into a smaller room occupied by the secretary, but this door was shut, and Mrs. Custance was alone in the large room. She was standing at one of the tables on which were spread out piles of practical-looking clothing, which she was evidently verifying laboriously from the note-book in her hand, and she looked up quickly as Norman spoke.

His three months' hard work had had no physical ill effects upon Norman, to judge from his personal appearance. He was as

thin as a man may be, but his face, a little older and more thoughtful for the responsibility he had assumed, was, like his pose, full of vigour and energy. But with Mrs. Custance those same three months had apparently gone hard, physically speaking. Norman had asked her, while his present scheme was still undreamt of, if she would work for him when he should ask her, and she had answered in the affirmative. Norman himself was quite unaware how incessantly he had kept her supplied with the tasks she accepted so quietly in redeeming her promise, but there was that peculiar fagged and worn look about her face now that only overwork produces.

“‘The manager?’” she answered, in a low inward voice that showed that her working had been accompanied with little talking lately. “‘I am very glad indeed!’”

Norman, too full of his news to care greatly to whom he told it, went on cheerily :

“He is a man named Elton—Richard Elton. He was introduced to me last week by a man I know very well, Stephen Mansfield, with a view to our coming to some arrangement—he is a connexion of Mansfield’s as a matter of fact. Mansfield’s recommendation goes a long way, of course, and I’ve managed to see a good deal of Elton himself. He’s the very man for us, and I settled with him, practically, last night.”

“I am very glad!”

“I am very glad!” echoed Norman heartily, walking up to the fireplace as he spoke and looking down into the fire. “It was a very serious gap—that manager gap. After a certain point everything will depend on him.”

There was no reply this time, though Mrs. Custance's eyes were fixed upon him with a faint satisfaction in them. Words, evidently, came to her no more readily than of old. And after a moment's pause, Norman seemed to remember to whom he was talking. He roused himself, and glancing at the table by which she was still standing, he said with a smile :

"You are early at work, Mrs. Custance!"

"I—I was just finishing these things. You wanted them put away before any one came to-day," she answered simply.

"That's very good of you," he answered lightly. "It seems to me that you are one of the few people to be relied on, Mrs. Custance."

He spoke carelessly enough and with a pleasant laugh. The work she did was all of the simplest and most mechanical sort,

and though he knew well that it had to be done, it seemed to him that any one could do it. The point of view from which he regarded Mrs. Custance had shifted a little since the Thornsdyke days, with the movement inevitable to the change of circumstances and surroundings, but the underlying estimate of her had not changed ; had only developed on its original lines. The very fact that he met her every day, often several times a day ; and that she was, so to speak, a humble part of the machinery connected with his all-absorbing interest, while it seemed to imply a continuation of the familiarity of the past, took from her for him even such personal interest as she might have retained had he seen her occasionally only. And the more he saw of her in contrast with his other helpers, the more did his original depreciatory estimate of her strengthen, and

the more confirmed became the half careless, half pitying consideration with which he regarded her.

But a faint colour came into her white face at his words, and she said quietly :

“What shall I do this morning?”

The words awoke in Norman's mind active remembrances of the hundred and one things that needed doing, and all consideration of her personality faded instantly from him. The form of words she had used precluded any necessity for thanking her.

“Well,” he said thoughtfully, going over facts in his own mind rather than talking to her, “the most important point to-day is the beating up of the doubtful women to come to the women's lecture to-night.” The lecture was one of a series on colonisation delivered weekly by Norman during the last two months. “It's a difficult business

and I'm very anxious——" He broke off abruptly and took a quick step or two towards the door as it opened to admit Stella Chisholm.

"Good morning, Miss Chisholm," he said eagerly. "You have come in the very nick of time. I was just thinking of getting the doubtful women beaten up for the lecture to-night."

"Do you want me to do it?" she said brightly. She shook hands with Mrs. Custance as she finished speaking, and then the latter turned away to finish her work over the table as Norman answered:

"If you will. Nobody has so much effect as you! I know I shall have the audience I want to-night if you will undertake it, and I shall be most grateful."

"I will do my very best," she said with a smile. "Will you give me the list?" and

then as he turned towards the door after putting a paper into her hand with a very earnest "Thank you," she added: "Where are you going to be this morning?"

With an exclamation at his own forgetfulness Norman turned back eagerly and told her, as he had told Mrs. Custance, of the new-found manager. There was a great deal more detail in this version of the story, such detail as implies a certainty of comprehension and sympathy, and he finished by saying:

"I'm going to meet him now, and introduce him to the committee. I shall bring him here in about an hour, and if you are here still I should awfully like to introduce him to you—and to Mrs. Custance," he added, rather as an afterthought.

"I will be here!" returned Stella enthusiastically. "I'm most anxious to see him."

He was turning away once more, his hand was absolutely on the door, when he stopped again and turned, this time to Mrs. Custance.

“Oh, Mrs. Custance!” he said, “that contribution from Lady Marston — two enormous cases of rubbish, probably—is in the store-room upstairs, not unpacked yet. Could you unpack it to-day, do you think, and make a list?”

Before her obvious acquiescence could express itself in words he was gone.

An hour later, Stella, having spent the interval in making spirited representations to one or two of those women who considered certain misery in St. Fabian's preferable to problematic prosperity in Canada, returned, as she had said she would, to the office. Mrs. Custance was still at work over the piles of clothing, a fresh batch having just

come in, and she was toiling hard over them in anticipation of the work waiting for her in the store-room. Norman and his manager were not immediately forthcoming, and Stella, having offered her services prettily and deferentially enough to Mrs. Custance, had worked for nearly half an hour, getting through twice as much in the time as did her companion, when the door opened at last, and Norman came in followed by a man of about five-and-thirty, with a rather sharp-featured face, light-brown eyes, and the carriage and dress of a gentleman.

“We are later than I said, I’m afraid,” said Norman; “I’m so glad to find you still here.” He looked at Stella as he spoke. “Mrs. Custance,” he continued, “let me introduce Mr. Richard Elton. Miss Chisholm—Mr. Richard Elton, our long-looked-for manager. We have only looked in for

a moment, I'm sorry to say," he went on, as his introduction was acknowledged, slightly and nervously by Mrs. Custance, very cordially by Stella, and courteously by the new-comer. "The committee has kept us an unconscionable time about nothing, as usual; and there's a great deal to be got through, isn't there, Elton?"

"Quite as much as we shall do in the time, it seems to me," answered the new recruit.

"One thing is settled, Miss Chisholm," went on Norman eagerly; "I go out with Elton this month for three weeks or so to see after things in Canada and set him going. We go on the twentieth."

CHAPTER XI.

Two months more had passed away and the autumn and winter that had seen the birth and developement of Norman's scheme were giving place to spring. The first spring weather came early, and the beginning of March was warm and sunny.

It was on the evening of a March day that had been full of gracious promise, that Stella Chisholm stood alone in her aunt's drawing-room, engaged in putting quick, dainty finishing touches to a glass of daffodils. She was already dressed for dinner though it was hardly seven o'clock. She was very prettily dressed, too, in a white frock that

suiting her admirably, and perhaps it was because its whiteness threw up the brightness of her colouring, and its cut outlined the slender buoyancy of her figure, that she looked as though the exhilaration of spring was in her veins—so fresh, so vigorous, so radiant. Her eyes were bright, there was a little light of expectancy over her whole face, her graceful pose was alert and full of spirit. Over the whole room, too, there was a spring-like look, produced probably by the quantities of spring flowers, on which the soft lamplight fell everywhere, though there was still a fire in the hearth.

Stella finished her proceedings with the flowers and, turning away, walked to the mantelpiece with the light, decided step which was so characteristic of her.

“Just seven,” she said to herself. “Just seven. I wonder how soon they’ll be here?”

She moved away, crossing the room towards the inner drawing-room as though in search of some occupation. She was giving some vigorous, but entirely unnecessary, attention to a lamp there, when the door behind her opened, and she turned quickly as Norman Strange and her brother came into the room together. With a little frank exclamation of pleasure she moved quickly down the room towards them, as Norman Strange advanced eagerly to meet her.

“How do you do?” was all she said. The same words broke from him the same moment. But the conventional greeting, as uttered by Stella, expressed all the pleasure and welcome with which her face was radiant; as uttered by Norman it expressed as much eagerness and satisfaction as though he had made a speech.

"How do you do?" he repeated with increased fervency of intonation, as though in the eagerness of the moment the simple form was all that he could grasp.

Stella had looked into his face, smiling as absolutely frankly as she had always done, when she gave him her hand with that ready, well-pleased gesture of welcome. But now, quite suddenly, as she met his eager eyes and felt the clasp with which his strong man's fingers closed round hers, her own eyes dropped; a rush of rosy colour dyed her cheeks crimson, and his eager words drew no response from her. In the rosy light thrown impartially over everything by the tinted lamplight in which they stood, her brilliant colour passed unseen either by Norman or her brother. Nor was her silence noticed as Norman followed his first words with a rather incoherent flood

of eloquence. She stood very still as he talked to her, as though she had received some slight shock of surprise; her cheeks were still flushed, and she did not look up at him. Then, as he stopped, she roused herself, seeming to give herself a little mental shake, and leading the way towards some chairs near the fire, she said, still not looking him in the face, however, and speaking with an ease and animation that was the slightest possible exaggeration of her ordinary manner :

“We have missed you terribly, Mr. Strange. The whole staff will give you a rapturous reception. Do sit down in that most comfortable chair—I’m sure you must be dreadfully tired after your journey—and tell us all your doings. Aubrey has heard them, no doubt, but I am longing to do so.”

The arrangement for his going in person to Canada, of which Norman had spoken

to Stella on his introduction of the newly-found manager two months before, had been duly carried into effect. A few hours before he made his appearance in Mrs. Alison's drawing-room on this March evening, he had arrived at Euston on his homeward journey, and had there been met by Aubrey Chisholm, who had delivered to him a command from his sister—which was merely supplemented by an invitation from Mrs. Alison—that the traveller, if he were not too tired, should dine at Gloucester Terrace that same evening, and, further, that he should come early that she, Stella, might hear some of his news before dinner. The traveller had promptly disclaimed any approach to fatigue on receiving this message, and he repeated his disclaimer now, as he took the chair she pointed out to him with the laugh of a man who is well content.

“The journey from Liverpool is not the journey from Winnipeg, you know, Miss Chisholm,” he said gaily. “Now, what shall I tell you first, or what will you tell me?”

The details of his work in Manitoba, inexhaustibly interesting to the three enthusiasts, were only just touched upon, as it seemed to them, when the quick, eager talk was interrupted by the appearance of Mrs. Alison, placid as ever, and shaking hands with Norman as though she had met him only the evening before, and the subsequent announcement of dinner. The meal was most hilarious; that strange little touch of unreality and constraint that had come over Stella's manner after her reception of Norman Strange had disappeared gradually but completely. She was her brightest self; ready to listen, ready to talk, full of interest, full of news, serious and amusing, on the

subject to which they invariably drifted back sooner or later, if any other topic held them for a minute or two—the progress of the Essendine scheme.

“And how does Mr. Elton get on?” asked Stella, with unflagging appetite for details, when dinner was over; Norman and her brother had appeared in the drawing-room after the shortest possible interval, and established themselves near the little table by which she sat at work. Mrs. Alison, only too glad that her habits should not be interfered with, had placidly composed herself to sleep in a chair by the fire.

“Elton!” repeated Norman rather absently as he watched her. Then rousing himself: “Oh, Elton gets on famously,” he said. “He’s gone into the affair heart and soul.” Norman had no idea that it was

quite impossible for any one working with himself to do otherwise. "And it was a great thing to be able to leave everything there in his hands. It was quite time some one was on the spot. I told you, didn't I, that he will stay there and receive the people? I haven't felt so reconciled to the impossibility of being on both sides of the Atlantic at one and the same time since the scheme was started!"

He laughed as he spoke, and Stella smiled up at him as she asked him another question. One branch of the subject led to another equally interesting; and it was by no means from any sense that the conversation was flagging that, an hour later, Aubrey rose with a sigh. His life in these days was a continual struggle between his duty to his vicar and his devotion to the Essendine scheme.

"I must go," he said reluctantly; "written sermons must go on, I suppose, though yours is the more practical kind I know, Norman! I shan't get one written to-night if I stay here. Stella, I want a book from the school-room; shall I find a light there?"

She nodded to him with a sympathising smile, and he turned away and left the room.

With his departure, though he had done little of the previous talking, a silence fell upon the two he left. Stella stitched silently, looking very brisk and free from self-consciousness as she sat there in the lamplight; Norman sat silently, his head resting on his hand as his elbow rested on the arm of his chair, and he leant a little forward.

All unconscious of them as she was, his eyes were fixed on Stella under the shade

of his hand, and he did not stir as he said at last in a low, still voice :

“ I wish I could tell you how glad I am to be at home again.”

She glanced up, but his face was in shadow, and she seemed to be almost unconsciously influenced by the tone of his voice as she answered softly :

“ We have missed you very much.”

There was a moment's pause ; a pause in which even Stella's brisk needle seemed to move gently, as though the atmosphere were strange and soft. It lasted until the opening door told that Aubrey was coming back, and then Norman rose, and stood looking down at the bent head which was not lifted as he moved. There was something about its pose indescribably gentle and womanly, something that, while it took away her frank confidence, gave to Stella

a charm that had never been hers before, and made her a far sweeter Stella than the girl Aubrey had left in that chair so few minutes before.

“Good night, Miss Chisholm,” said Norman, in the same low tone. “Will you say welcome home to me?”

Stella did not raise her eyes, and the pretty head was bent a little lower yet.

“Welcome home,” she said, very softly.

He had not seen her eyes again—not even when he held out his hand to her, after saying good night to her aunt, and felt the little, all-unconscious clasp she gave it—when he went downstairs with Aubrey a few minutes later, leaving Mrs. Alison and her niece alone together.

For a very short distance only did Norman’s way home and Aubrey’s lie together

and during their walk Aubrey came to the conclusion that his companion was more tired than he chose to allow. For Norman was very silent. He roused himself, however, when they parted and said his good night words with an access of even unwonted cordiality and affection. Then he took his solitary road home, looking like a man who treads upon air, let himself into his rooms, and walking vaguely up to the hearth, stood there looking down at the fire with a sigh of supreme content.

Norman Strange was not a man to do things by halves, and he loved Stella Chisholm with all his heart and soul. It seemed to him now that he had known from the very first that he should love her; he could trace no stages in the growth of his feeling; it had all developed gradually, naturally, inevitably, from his first sight of her in the

children's play-room of St. Fabian's until this night, when his heart was strong and tender and glowing with the thought of her last touch on his hand. His love had grown up in the midst of incessant labour, side by side with passionate enthusiasm for interests which were not his own except as his quixotism made them so. She had worked with an ardour which sweetened all his toil for the cause for which he worked; they had met incessantly; there had been between them the sympathy of a common interest; and in the constant stress of work and thought in which those winter months had passed he had had neither time nor self-interest sufficient to ask for more. His love had grown day by day, simple, ardent, unselfish, but of intentional love-making he had never thought until to-night. To-night, in the intense delight of being with her again after

the five weeks' absence which had seemed unutterably long to him; in that peaceful moment when he and she sat practically alone together in the quiet room; something of the intense feeling of which he was full had overflowed. To-night for the first time, as he stood before the fire in his own room, he asked himself the question: "Does she care?" and every nerve in him tingled and burned as he left the answer unexpressed.

"Welcome home!" he said to himself softly, and with an indescribable radiance in his eyes, "welcome home!" He moved and flung himself into an arm-chair as though to give himself up more completely to his thoughts.

"I'll wait till the work is done," he said to himself. "She'll understand!" He smiled as he spoke, a smile so bright and tender that his face was absolutely trans-

figured by it. There was no morbidness, no self-torturing doubt about his love. It was the natural, healthy growth of a chivalrous, straightforward soul, and it was as simple as it was loyal and ardent. He was too full of sympathies to be conceited; he had no more self-confidence than belongs inevitably to an enthusiastic temperament. But he thought he had ground for hope and he hoped and rejoiced accordingly.

“Till the work is done!” he said again.

“Till the work is done! And then——”

He did not finish the sentence in words.

CHAPTER XII.

“It shall be attended to, my dear sir, it shall be attended to without delay. As you say, it is a most important matter.”

It was about twelve o'clock on the morning following Norman Strange's arrival in London, and Dr. Custance was sitting comfortably back in one of the arm-chairs—provided with a cushion during the last six weeks—at the more official-looking of the two large tables in the Long Street office of the Essendine scheme. At the other table, bending over a large volume, into which she was copying from sundry sheets of paper at her side, was Mrs. Custance,

and with his back to her, as he faced her husband, sat the man to whom the suave words of the latter had been addressed. He was a broad-shouldered, middle-aged man, with the air of a superior master mechanic, and he moved uneasily on his chair as he answered :

“ Beg pardon, sir, but you said that to me a week ago, when I looked in about the same matter, and the order hasn’t been given yet.”

“ Did I, indeed ? ” returned Dr. Custance with bland interest. “ Ah, really ! You see, Mr. Adams, the press of business in Mr. Strange’s absence is so great that it is impossible to accomplish it all. But there shall be no more postponement of this matter, I assure you.”

Dr. Custance pushed his chair back a little, as though to intimate that the press

of business to which he alluded rendered it necessary that the interview should close ; and Mr. Adams took the hint and rose.

“ Thank you, sir,” he said ; “ Mr. Strange would wish us to be getting on, I know. When is Mr. Strange expected, may I ask, sir ? ”

“ I expect him here in the course of to-day,” returned Dr. Custance with the utmost pleasantness. “ Yes, we shall indeed all be glad to see him. Good morning, Mr. Adams. Fine day it is.”

Dr. Custance saw his visitor out of the door with the greatest politeness ; but his expression lost its amiability as he shut the door after him and sauntered back to his chair, pulling it luxuriously round to the fire as he did so, and making no attempt whatever to grapple with any press of business.

Such little scenes as that just concluded had been of daily, latterly of almost hourly, occurrence during the past six weeks. It was Norman Strange's weakest point as a manager that in dealing with possible helpers he was apt to impute to all alike his own enthusiasm ; to fail in discrimination between that reflected glow which his own fire flung upon any man with whom he came in contact and that man's private individuality. From the foundation of the Essendine scheme he had regretted, when he had had time to think of it, that Dr. Custance should have no place in it. Judging that gentleman by himself, it seemed to him hard that so prominent a figure in the business from which the whole affair had sprung—the Essendine trust—should be excluded from the wider and more important scheme, and he was quite unconscious of the care taken

by Dr. Custance that such should be the case. In arranging for the transaction of business in London during his absence in America, therefore, he had been glad to seize the opportunity of, as it seemed to him, showing his goodwill to Dr. Custance by asking him to undertake, for the time being, an important branch of the work involving a good deal of attendance at the office in Long Street. Norman, in one of his most rapid, ardent, and business-like phases, was not to be denied without a great deal more trouble than Dr. Custance cared to take on the subject. That gentleman had undertaken all that was asked of him, and he had since neglected it wholesale.

In spite of his leisurely, comfortable attitude Dr. Custance looked far from satisfied as he sat by the fire after disposing of Mr. Adams. As a matter of fact he had been

extremely dissatisfied for some time now, and he was becoming increasingly so with every day that passed. He found himself drifting, certainly through no fault of his own, into an atmosphere of that energy that was abhorrent to him; into an atmosphere in which the attitude of ease, which he loved, was untenable; and from which even the extrication of himself seemed to involve effort. In addition to these circumstances the office for which he received his salary from the Essendine Trust Fund had ceased to be a complete sinecure; he was well aware—and the knowledge was an additional annoyance—that the work involved by it would increase with every month. And behind all this, souring and embittering his very irritation, was a sense of potentiality about his present circumstances; a sense that somewhere, if he could only define it and narrow it into a plan of action,

there was something, some solid advantage, to be obtained by some manipulation of them which he could not yet understand. Limited private means and an unlimited inclination towards idleness and self-indulgence had gradually narrowed Dr. Custance's conception of "solid advantage"; it had come to mean for him money for which he should not have to work, and on which he could live in absolute indolence; and for some months now he had given the subject his best consideration. It was a dim foreshadowing of undefined possibilities on these lines that had occupied his mind after that interview with Norman Strange, in which the intentions of the latter, with regard to the Essendine trust, were made known to him. But these possibilities, so dim then that the vaguest words, even definite thought, would have given them form and

reality that they did not possess, had failed to develop themselves satisfactorily since. There was a great deal of money going about, and not only did he himself obtain the merest pittance, but it was, moreover, becoming necessary that he should work for that pittance. He was rasped, as it were, alike by the elusive potentialities and the pressing actualities of his position.

A long silence followed his re-establishment of himself in his chair after the departure of Mr. Adams; a silence broken only by the slow scratch of his wife's pen as it travelled laboriously down the page. At last that sound, too, ceased, and there was a moment's dead silence.

Mrs. Custance had laid down her pen, and during that moment she sat quite still, her fingers pinching each other till the pressure must have been painful, her colour

coming and going, her lips twitching nervously. All the signs of overwork noticeable about her in January were accentuated now, and she looked like the merest shadow of her insignificant self. It was with an effort that was obviously terrible to her that she said, in a low, shaking voice, while her eyes fixed themselves with a curious mixture of courage and pitiful dread on her husband :

“ Are you—are you going to the city now ? ”

Dr. Custance turned indolently in his chair and surveyed her for a moment very much as he might have done if Susan, in the furnished house in Bloomsbury, had ventured to ask him a question. Her very lips had whitened with fear before he said quietly :

“ What did you say, Leila ? ”

Her voice was not forthcoming on her first attempt to answer him ; but she made

a valiant effort which harmonised ill with her frightened face, and answered :

“The order Mr. Adams came about—the workshops are at a standstill. Won’t you”—she faltered, but went on bravely—“won’t you go and give the order this morning?”

Workshops at which intending colonists should learn the rudiments of carpentering and similar handicrafts had been instituted by Norman early in the proceedings, and were one of his favourite hobbies. For three weeks now the work in them had languished in consequence of Dr. Custance’s neglect.

Dr. Custance contemplated his wife for a moment with a look which was not pleasant to see.

“No!” he said, and turned his head away as though the subject were closed.

“May—may I go?”

He pushed his chair round sharply as the faltering voice fell on his ear, and a little shiver shook Mrs. Custance from head to foot. No one knew, as his wife did, the effect of the last few months on Dr. Custance's temper. She stood her ground nevertheless.

“If you would tell me——” she began.

Her husband interrupted her.

“You may not go!” he said with grim quiet. “If you recall your achievements over those packing-cases to what you are pleased, I suppose, to call your mind, I think you will refrain from further interference.”

He paused a moment and laughed sarcastically as a painful flush touched her white face for a moment; then he continued, still quite quietly, but in a tone under which she shook from head to foot:

“You have been good enough to do your best to keep me up to my work on several occasions lately, Leila. I don’t know how you got into that habit; but you will get out of it without delay. Do you hear me?”

He waited for a response, and she said faintly :

“I am sorry. I—I—it is only that I am so anxious——”

He interrupted her again.

“I know,” he said. “I know well that this tomfoolery is your mania at present, and I am well aware” — his tone became indolently ironical as he spoke — “I am well aware that this magnificent scheme would fall to pieces without your invaluable assistance. Is not your intellect—limited I admit — completely absorbed in it to the entire neglect of your home?”

A new fear sprang into the dull blue eyes, a sudden sick terror.

"I am sorry," she said again rapidly, almost beseechingly this time. "I am very sorry. I have tried not to neglect anything. I will try——"

"You had better," interposed her husband, soothed into indolent satisfaction by her obvious agony of distress. "I should be sorry to deprive the affair of your service, as I might otherwise be obliged to do."

He turned away from her again as he finished, and resumed his indolent attitude, his irritation relieved by the vent she had provided for it. He did not see the dumb misery of dread—so intense that for an instant it was almost passion—which spoke in every line of her white face and in the dilated blue eyes. She did not speak again.

Mechanically, apparently, and as though with the instinct to do what work she could while it was yet within her power, she took up her pen and was bending again over her book when the door opened and Norman Strange came in.

Norman's face was by no means the expansive, susceptible face of the Norman of the previous evening; it was almost stern in its business-like intentness. Short as was the time that had elapsed since his arrival in England, he had already got through a considerable quantity of the arrears of work waiting for him; he was reabsorbed with all the intensity of reaction in the London aspect of the scheme; and the personal exuberance of return was altogether overlaid. He felt almost as though he had never been away. The process of resuming his position with regard to all

the business in hand had, moreover, been considerably hastened by the discovery of how much there was for him to do; how much larger than they should have been were the arrears, owing to Dr. Custance's neglect. It had been impossible for him to take a single step in any direction without making discoveries on this point, and he knew that he was as yet only on the threshold.

He went quickly up to the table, behind which Mrs. Custance rose to meet him, her face quite dull and stupid with her sudden instinctive repression, on the opening of the door, of all emotion.

"Ah, Mrs. Custance," he said kindly, but with none of the eagerness or excitement of an arrival, "I thought I should find you here. How are you?"

She shook hands with him in silence,

and before any words had come to her he had turned away and was shaking hands with her husband.

Dr. Custance received him with much indolent effusion. He was full of enquiries as to his health, his personal welfare during the past six weeks, and his voyage; and Norman finally said, after replying very briefly to a question on the latter subject :

“I’m sorry to say I’m rather pressed for time, Doctor, just now. I’m on my way to go through the books with Phillips” —Phillips was the secretary at work in the inner room—“and I thought that you and I would go into things together this afternoon.” He paused a moment, glancing over to the writing-table at which Dr. Custance had been sitting, and he missed a momentary and very unpleasant change that came over the other man’s face.

"It seems horribly ungrateful to begin to find fault even before I've thanked you for the heap of good work I'm sure you have done," Norman continued suddenly, as though under the pressure of vexation not to be repressed; "but I say, Custance, my dear fellow, those packing-cases! What on earth happened? Ten feet by eight and five-and-twenty of them."

Dr. Custance turned to his wife with his most unpleasant smile.

"I think you'd better explain the packing-cases to Mr. Strange, Leila," he said.

With an exclamation of surprise Norman also turned to her, and she looked up at them, glancing from one to the other and fingering her pen nervously.

"I am very sorry, indeed," she began in a strained, hesitating voice, fixing her eyes on Norman's face, on which surprise

and annoyance that tried to repress itself, were blended.

“I thought the order ought to be given——” she hesitated, and glanced at her husband. “I ordered them!” she faltered at last, as no help of any sort seemed to be forthcoming. “I am very, very sorry they are wrong. I thought the man said——”

Norman, pitying her evident distress, though he was quite unaware of the heroic effort to make up for her husband's neglect, and to help things forward, involved in what he mentally characterised as “the little woman's extraordinary interference,” interposed quickly and kindly.

“Oh, it isn't of any great consequence, Mrs. Custance!” he said, trying to conceal his annoyance and to speak lightly and reassuringly. “We can easily get others made. It's only that time is getting on,

you see. Don't trouble any more about it. I shouldn't have said anything!"

That time was getting on was just what Mrs. Custance had seen, but she was quite incapable of explaining further, and Norman, turning to her husband, went on :

"Now, Doctor, I expect you were just going down to the city to see about that stuff Adams wants. I met him just now. Don't let me keep you. I'm going in to Phillips."

With a nod of farewell he opened the door into the inner room and disappeared ; and Dr. Custance, taking his hat, left the room also, without a word to his wife, and with as ugly an expression on his good-looking face as it had ever worn in his life. He did not proceed in the direction of the city.

An hour and more had passed when the door between the two offices reopened and

Norman Strange came out. And his face, very grave and preoccupied after his interview with the secretary, lighted up suddenly as he did so. Stella Chisholm was sitting opposite Mrs. Custance at the table, dictating to her from a paper in her hand.

Her back was towards the door by which he had entered, and she did not pause in her dictation as it opened, though her voice hardened hardly perceptibly; nor did she raise her head as he walked quickly down the room saying eagerly :

“Good morning, Miss Chisholm! I’m so glad to find you here!”

“Good morning,” she returned coldly and briefly, interrupting herself as though perforce to answer his greeting.

She did not turn her head, and Norman stopped short, feeling, almost without knowing why, as though he had received a blow.

Her tone was so unlike itself. Then he recovered himself, and going up to her chair he stood beside her, as he said brightly :

“ Things seem to me to have been getting a little slack lately, and I’m going to announce a lecture for to-morrow night. I’ve got a lot of new illustrations—lime-light effects—and I was wondering when I should get to you to arrange them for me—if you will be so kind.”

In all the more picturesque of his lectures the ready co-operation of Stella’s quick fingers and artistic sense had been of the utmost assistance to him. She had worked at his illustrations at home, and had helped behind the scenes on the platform with the zeal which characterised all her work, and Norman had always declared that he owed to her more than half the success of his illustrated lectures. Now,

however, almost before he had finished speaking, she answered, in the same cold, entirely uninterested tone :

“ I have an engagement for to-morrow night. Miss Bird ”—one of the numerous lady helpers—“ will help you, no doubt. Are you ready, Mrs. Custance ? ”

She began to read from her sheet of paper, and Mrs. Custance, who had been sitting during the brief colloquy with her pen in her hand and her eyes fixed upon the book before her, bent rather suddenly over her task. Norman, after standing by for a moment with a dazed expression in his eyes, turned away and left the room in silence, going about some of the business that claimed him on all hands.

“ It’s my fancy ! ” he said to himself bravely. “ It’s only my fancy. ‘ Welcome home ! ’ ”

CHAPTER XIII.

WITH the return of Norman Strange to London, fresh from the very site upon which the forthcoming social experiment was to be worked out, public excitement on the subject, which had subsided somewhat during the months of necessary but uninteresting preparation, flared up again suddenly. The papers were full of items of information as to the progress of "this most important experiment," as it began to be called; full also of conjectures and prophecies favourable and unfavourable. Norman's name was by this time as much talked of in connection with the affair as was that of its nominal

founder, Mr. Essendine. He was alluded to as a Quixote, a genius, or a speculator, according to the individual sympathies of the speaker or writer. And before he had been back in London a fortnight those papers favourably inclined to the scheme were beginning to hint their regrets at the wear and tear to the health of Mr. Strange involved in the strain of final preparation. Mr. Strange, they said, was looking "regrettably ill and worn with work."

As to the fact, the newspapers were right. But they referred it to the wrong cause. During the fortnight that followed his return, Norman's face lost all its animation, all its glow of eager life, and grew with every day more haggard. But it was not with the work—or rather not with the work itself. The strain of being forced to work, of being compelled to concentrate his attention

on business affairs in the presence of gnawing private pain was very heavy ; it gave his face the desperate intentness that grew upon it daily. But the change in him originated, as did that very strain, in the private pain.

The "good night" he had said to Stella Chisholm, when he left her in her aunt's drawing-room on the night of his return from America, had apparently closed for ever that leaf of his life's story made beautiful by the intercourse of the past few months ; made most beautiful by the record of the moment in which she had given him the welcome home for which he had asked. He had left her after their meeting in the office on the following morning telling himself that it was his imagination alone that found her manner so changed and cold. He told himself that his happy thoughts of the night before had carried him beyond the

present. He persuaded himself that when he saw her next he would know how fanciful he had been. Two days elapsed before that next meeting—an interval for which he tried in vain to account, though Stella could have accounted for it very easily—and when at last business connected with the scheme threw them perforce together, he could deceive himself no longer. Stella's manner to him was completely altered. Where she had once been eager, responsive, and sympathetic, she was cold, uninterested, and even repellent; holding herself aloof with a kind of impetuous haughtiness which seemed ready to flash into fiery indignation if he should force himself upon her.

Pained and bewildered beyond expression; with never a moment to call his own in which to dwell upon his own affairs; he felt himself drifting with every day further and further

from her. Once when she had responded with a withering, impulsive refusal to a desperate attempt of his to arrange some mutual work on the old footing, he had asked her hastily, as she pulled herself up and resumed her tone of cold indifference, what he had done to offend her. She had looked at him for a moment as though in her supreme indifference the possibility of his offending her was almost inconceivable, and then she had laughed—a light, girlish laugh of scorn.

“You’ve not offended me, Mr. Strange!” she said. “What a ridiculous idea!”

And to Norman the blow dealt by the downfall of all his hopes was confusing and overwhelming in proportion as those hopes had been single-minded and ardent. The very chivalrous man is never, perhaps, a keen student of woman ; and it never occurred to Norman to seek in Stella herself the cause

of his distress. Still less did it occur to his loyal love to think that with that welcome home, at least, she had given him a right to some explanation of so sudden a change. He himself had made a frightful mistake somewhere. That was his one and only idea on the subject.

He could not understand it. He had no time to understand it. One day followed another, and each night that found his private hopes laid lower found also the business of the Essendine scheme increasing on him with the stress and pressure of rapidly approaching consummation, and with all the stir and excitement of publicly anticipated success, until he felt as though the incessant round of thought and labour in which he lived were some horrible machinery in which all his personal interests were being crushed out of existence. The vessel in which the

colonists were to sail was to leave England on the twenty-fifth of April. As the end of March drew on, all the lines of preparation so hopefully and enthusiastically laid down and followed up by him throughout the winter converged to their climax amid an ever-increasing mass of work, with ever-increasing excitement among the crowd of helpers who looked to Norman for every direction, and in whose thoughts the twenty-fifth of April represented—for the time being—the end of all things. The scheme had been taken up by some of the leading philanthropists of the day; and Mr. Essendine, whose pompous satisfaction in the public interest and discussion of which his name was the centre was unbounded, had insisted on the convening of a great meeting to take place some two days before the departure of the “experiment,” at which

these gentlemen should bestow their blessing upon the departing colonists, and their thanks and congratulations on himself; thereby enduing the proceeding with all possible *éclat*. The idea was a good one, although Mr. Essendine's reasons for proposing it and Norman's reasons for supporting it were strikingly dissimilar; and Norman added to all his other business the labour of working it to a successful issue. Great lights, parliamentary, philanthropic and social, were to be had for the asking; and it was finally hinted that an offshoot of royalty itself might be induced to shed the final glory of its presence if properly approached.

It was the second of April. Some days had elapsed since this hint had been conveyed to Norman, and by him judiciously acted upon. He was wondering with heavy contentment as he walked rapidly along a street

in St. Fabian's parish whether he should that day receive the royal answer pending which his arrangements were at a standstill, and he started as a man coming out of one of the narrow doorways stopped him as he passed along the noisy street. He was a shrewd-looking man who had been found by Norman going rapidly under in a hand-to-hand struggle with the destitution engendered by uncertain work and a family of seven children, and he was one of the most promising of the prospective colonists.

"Beg pardon, sir!" he said, "I see you comin' and I wanted to ask you about our bits o' sticks. They must be sold, sir?"

It was one of the thousand and one points on which one or other of the two hundred odd human beings making up the forty families who looked to Norman now as their highest authority was always requiring

satisfaction from his own lips ; and he stopped and answered the man as though for the moment he had no other business in life.

“ Yes, Reynolds,” he said kindly and firmly. “ There’s no doubt about that. You see——”

“ Thank ye, sir !” interrupted the man, not rudely, but with a rough respect for Norman’s time. “ You explained it all fine the other night and don’t you trouble to do it again. I’m agreeable enough. It’s my missus, sir. She do take agin it, and that’s the fact. Maybe if Miss Stella would come and talk things over with her a bit she’d come round. P’raps if you see Miss Stella, sir, you’d ask her ?”

“ I’ll ask her,” returned Norman.

The haggard face grew a shade more haggard as he spoke, and the man looking

at him thought that Mr. Strange looked "mortal bad!"

"Don't you overdo it, sir!" he said abruptly, with rough anxiety. "The whole concern's hitched on to you, sir, and it 'ud be a poor job if you was to wear yourself out over it."

"I shan't wear out, Reynolds," answered Norman with a faint smile, meeting the man's eyes with the determined resolution in his own that had replaced the exuberant enthusiasm of a month ago. "I am going to see this thing through, that's all." He wished the man "good day" and walked on. And Reynolds looked after him with a vague sense that "Mr. Strange's way, it made a man feel like as how difficulties weren't nothing."

A few minutes' more rapid walking brought Norman to the door of an empty

warehouse, which had been lent to the committee of the Essendine scheme for packing purposes. He opened the door and then stood suddenly still. It was not yet eleven o'clock in the morning, but there were people already busily at work, and it would have been not unnatural that he should fail for the moment to make out, among the moving groups, the figure of that particular man to whom he wished to speak. But it was no sense of numbers that brought him to a standstill. It was his instantaneous realisation of one figure—that of Stella Chisholm. She was kneeling in the midst of a quantity of books—a kindly gift which she was engaged in sorting and packing—and he would be obliged to pass close to her on his way down the room.

“Good morning, Miss Chisholm!” The words were spoken very low as he lingered

for a moment by the graceful, obstinately unconscious figure.

“Good morning!” Stella had apparently no time to spare from her packing-case, for she did not look up and Norman passed on; passed on with haggard, concentrated eyes that did not even see the pale little face of Mrs. Custance as she raised her head for a moment and followed him down the room with dull blue eyes. She was kneeling in shadow over a pile of books just behind Stella Chisholm, whose task she was sharing.

A great deal of business needing Norman's personal attention invariably presented itself whenever he put in an appearance among his helpers, and it was nearly two hours before he had disposed of all the details requiring a word from him. It was one o'clock and almost every one had gone away to lunch when he came down the nearly

empty room towards the door, his face set as though the concentration with which he had attended to business had been a severe effort of self-compulsion. He stopped once more beside the packing-case over which Stella and Mrs. Custance were still at work, and just as he did so, just as the stern set of his eyes was relaxing into a wistful glance of deprecation, the door opened and Dr. Custance came in.

“Ah, Strange!” he said indolently. “That’s lucky! What about this ambulance business, now? Good morning, Miss Chisholm!”

Dr. Custance had found as he had anticipated that it was quite impossible to extricate himself from the whirlpool of work into which he had been drawn. The relations between himself and Norman had become somewhat strained when it became

necessary for him to give an account of his proceedings during Norman's absence in America, and in order to avoid that open rupture which he by no means desired, Dr. Custance had not only consented to give but had actually given, several ambulance lectures to the intending colonists. It added to the vague grudge already existing in his mind against Norman that the latter should have succeeded in forcing him to work.

"It is to-night, isn't it?" replied Norman to him now, his eyes intent and business-like again, and understanding instantly that Dr. Custance was referring to the necessary arrangements for the evening's lecture. "Will you see to things yourself, Custance, please? I'll send Brown with you."

He turned and called to a youth still at work at the end of the room, and told him to see that arrangements were made as

Dr. Custance wished. Dr. Custance, satisfied that nothing but desultory overseeing would be required of him, went away with his assistant, and business having once more released him, Norman turned again to Stella with that wistful softening of his face.

Stella had returned Dr. Custance's salutation with the distant civility with which she always treated that gentleman, and had gone on with her packing without showing the faintest sign of interest in the conversation between the two men.

"Miss Chisholm," said Norman, in a low, tentative tone, as she knelt on the floor with her back to him, "Mrs. Reynolds can't make up her mind to the sale of their furniture, Reynolds tells me; I should be so grateful if you could go and see her and talk to her about it."

"I have some work to do for Aubrey

this afternoon. Ask some one else, please, Mr. Strange."

It was exactly the same tone, or so it seemed to Norman, as that in which she had returned Dr. Custance's good morning, and she did not interrupt her work to turn to him as she answered. There was a moment's pause, and Norman stood looking down at her with a weary pain in his face very pitiful to see. The silence was broken by Mrs. Custance, who stood on the opposite side of the packing-case handing books to Stella, and who was thus facing Norman.

"Miss Chisholm," she said, and her voice was a little high and uneven, "Miss Chisholm, I think—didn't you say—it was the red catalogue you wanted to take home with you, wasn't it? Mr. Strange—— Isn't it the red catalogue you have there, Mr. Strange?"

Stella turned quickly towards him.

“Oh, do you want it?” she said hastily. “I wanted particularly to have it for to-morrow morning.”

“I’m awfully sorry,” returned Norman, eagerly hailing the neutrality of tone into which she had been surprised. “I do want it this evening, Miss Chisholm; I’m afraid I can’t do without it, but I will bring it round before nine to-night, and leave it for you. I shall be able to leave word for you at the same time about the Duke, I hope. You’ve heard, of course, that there’s every chance of him?”

He was looking straight down at her as he spoke, eagerly looking for the response for which he hungered. But Stella, meeting his eyes, seemed suddenly to recollect herself. The quick interest which had been surprised into her face by her desire for the

book froze out of it, as it were, and she rose.

“Thank you!” she said coldly. “Don’t take that trouble, please. I can manage quite well without the catalogue. Mrs. Custance, we want some more books.”

She turned as she spoke, moving away to the other end of the long room, presumably in search of the books in question. And as she went, taking with her all light and hope from the face of the man she left, his haggard eyes, gazing straight before him, met the pair of faded blue ones fixed upon him. It was for Norman one of those moments of crushing disappointment in which any fellow-creature who has seen the blow dealt becomes perforce a kind of confidant, and meeting those blue eyes he spoke to them almost involuntarily :

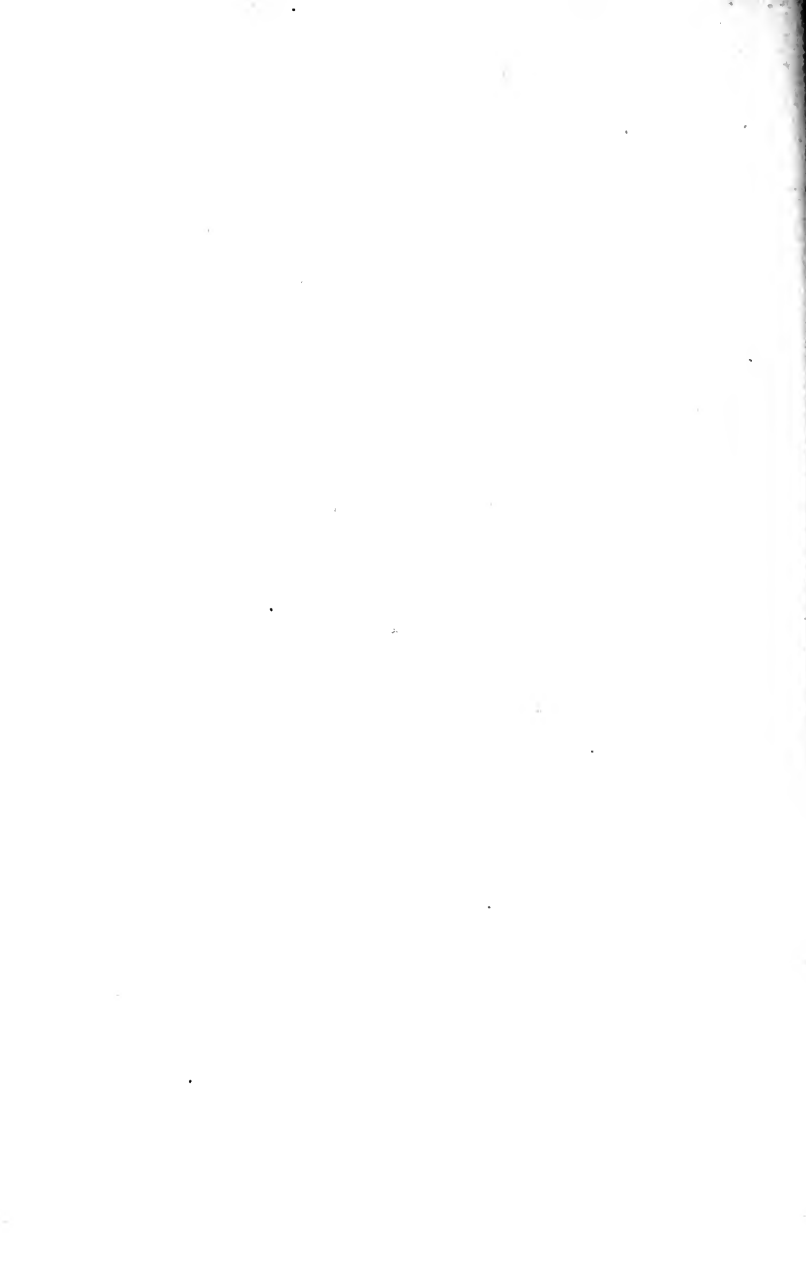
“Some one must have told her,” he said

in a low, hoarse voice. "She has heard—why I went to Thornsdyke."

Without another word, white to the lips with the crushing sense of conviction into which sundry vague thoughts as to the possibility of such an explanation of the change in Stella had suddenly resolved themselves, he turned away and left the room.

END OF VOL. II.





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